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MAUREEN KINCAID SPELLER ON THE NEED FOR DIVERSE BOOKS

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COVER ART BY MARTIN HANFORD · NOV-DEC 2015 · £4.99

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EDITORIAL

WE ALL NEED DIVERSE BOOKS by MAUREEN KINCAID SPELLER

The children's writer Meg Rosoff recently courted controversy when she argued against the need for a children's book about a queer black boy, which had been published thanks to crowdfunding. According to Rosoff "there are not too few books for marginalized young people" and that literature does not have the "job of being a mirror". Her view was that children's literature was becoming rather too literal, and that there were plenty of books about marginalised children, as if all forms of marginalisation were easily interchangeable, when this is manifestly not so.

Rosoff surely knows that children look for people like themselves when they read. The same holds true for all of us, in all literary spheres, including science fiction and fantasy. Just because it's always been a white male world doesn't mean it has to stay that way, even if you are a white male writer. Yet, expanding those fictional horizons too often relies on writers inserting a token strong female protagonist, or increasingly, a person of colour, into the story, to stand in for all the others they don't see, and won't write about. Or else they cautiously experiment with stepping beyond the heteronormative, all the while telling everyone that this has been carefully researched. Which, I suppose, is reassuring, but it's hardly enough.

While it is undoubtedly important that straight white writers acknowledge the limitations of their fiction and deal with its deficiencies, this is not the best solution, simply because it keeps white writers front and centre. There are many people of colour and LGBTQ writers working outside the UK-American publishing hegemony, publishing through small presses, crowdfunded anthologies and small magazines, producing genuinely new and innovative work. We should be reading them, talking about their work, and most importantly, listening to what they have to say, because they speak from their own life experiences as much as from the imagination.

No doubt someone is already saying that it's just science fiction, for heaven's sake, and that's all about imagining things, or else complaining that I'm stunting their creativity by saying they can't write about X or Y. I'm not saying that at all. I'm pointing out that there are writers who really are much better placed to write about certain issues, or from particular points of view. Rather than trying to speak for them, why not make more space for them to speak? Instead of appropriating their culture or mythology for your work, take a lead from the people who grew up in it as to whether it's permissible to rework those myths.

Rosoff was very wrong when she said that literature's job is not to be a mirror. This is precisely what it should be doing. As a child I looked to stories to show me people like me – girls who had proper adventures rather than staying home while the boys had fun. As an adult, I expect the fiction I read to acknowledge the world around me, an ethnically diverse, homonormative, intersectional world, a world in which the colour of my skin and my sexual preferences do not mean I am privileged to speak for and over other people. And that is as true for science fiction as it is for any other genre.

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ISSN 0264-3596

Publisher
TTA Press, 5 Martins Lane,
Witcham, Ely, Cambs CB6 2LB, UK
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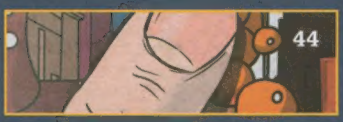

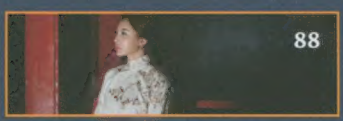

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JONATHAN McCALMONT'S FUTURE INTERRUPTED

HARDER-CORE-THAN-THOU

'Core Science Fiction' is one of the most contentious terms in contemporary science fiction. Often deployed by reviewers and publicists in quite an unthinking manner, the term is associated with a strain of science fiction that echoes the style and subject matter of stories first published in pulp magazines during the so-called Golden Age of science fiction. In order to understand why 'Core SF' is a contested term, it is first necessary to understand how the discourse surrounding genre fiction periodically changes in an effort to reflect emerging commercial realities.

When the market for pulp magazines collapsed at the end of the 1950s, the science fiction field abandoned its association with popular science magazines in favour of an association with literary fiction. However, in order to appeal to the types of people who read and edited literary fiction, genre authors were forced to change both the style and format of the stories they produced. Some writers struggled to adapt and so disappeared from the field completely but the economic and aesthetic changes caused by the re-positioning of science fiction's economic heartland meant that the field also began attracting authors whose work would never have been a good fit for magazines aimed at amateur radio enthusiasts.

In hindsight, the differences between pre- and post-collapse science fiction are so pronounced that it would almost make sense to talk about the stories published in pulp magazines as having been part of a completely different genre to those produced by literary publishers. However, the presence of certain individuals and institutions in both contexts means that it does make sense to talk about genre culture as a single evolving entity rather than a series of much shorter-lived scenes. Genre culture did not so much die as evolve thanks to a collection of authors, critics, and anthologists who presented the changes in genre literature not as a product of economics but as the natural and desirable result of science fiction having progressed and become more sophisticated.

While genre culture likes to remember its brief flirtations with literary respectability, the truth is that the genre's off-again, on-again relationship with literary fiction has proved just as economically unstable as its earlier association with popular science. The economic heartland of the genre shifts every few years and what genre culture calls 'progress' is really little more than the unending and undignified evolutionary scramble to keep making sales even as old markets collapse and reform.

For example, it was probably not until the 1980s that the people running genre imprints began to realise that the market for fantasy was considerably larger than the market for science fiction. The emergence of *Dungeons & Dragons* novels as international best-sellers seemed to take genre publishers completely by surprise but the discovery of an enormous market for fat fantasy changed the economics of the genre and resulted in science fiction novels getting progressively longer as complex plots and detailed world-building came to be seen as more important than psychological complexity or stylistic innovation. By the beginning of the 21st Century, science fiction's economic heartland had moved so close to that of epic fantasy that critics began to talk of 'evaporating genres' as a way of describing the use of science-fictional tropes and techniques in novels which, like China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*, were almost indistinguishable from those marketed as epic fantasy. It is no accident that while the New Weird may have begun when the British literary mainstream (re)discovered the existence of the British science fiction scene, the movement was later re-imagined as a blending of conventional genres by American authors and anthologists who simply could not see beyond the impulse to justify collapsing three very different literary traditions into one enormous market for commercial fantasy.

A similar shift is now underway as the market for epic fantasy is shrinking almost as fast as the markets for young adult and children's literatures continue to expand. As with the shifts towards literary fiction and epic fantasy, the current rapprochement with YA is driven by a shift in the market that is accompanied by both a re-ordering of aesthetic ideals and changes in the discourse. Just as the New Wave justified itself in terms of the genre naturally becoming more sophisticated, many of today's authors, critics and anthologists present themselves as inheritors of a future in

Given genre culture's fondness for re-inventing itself, I completely understand people who feel that their sub-culture has slipped away from them...

which science fiction is naturally more inclusive and diverse.

Genre culture likes to think of itself as progressive and so every shift in the market is processed and internalised using rhetoric that champions the new and revolutionary at the expense of the old and reactionary. This dialectic is common to most cultural ecosystems and every time the new wins out over the old it creates a crisis of legitimacy in which the benefits of the new are weighed against the cost of abandoning the old. Unlike other cultural ecosystems where the old and the new are often presented as antithetical, genre culture has grown quite adept at reconciling the old and the new meaning that the old rhetorics of conceptual novelty and literary sophistication often sit quite comfortably beside the new rhetorics of genre-transgression and diversity, but the fact that these aesthetics are not seen as being in direct conflict does not mean that legitimacy is no longer an issue.

'Core Science Fiction' is a deeply problematic concept as it suggests that some forms of literature are central to science fiction while others are more peripheral. When people point to recent works like Neal Stephenson's *Seveneves* or Kim Stanley Robinson's *Aurora* and declare them to be works of 'Core SF', they are effectively suggesting that works that could have been published thirty years ago under the auspices of science fiction are somehow more legitimate than works like *The Girl in the Road* by Monica Byrne, which might not have been identified as SF were it not for a generalised culture of hipness about genre boundaries.

Given genre culture's fondness for re-inventing itself, I completely understand people who feel that their sub-culture has slipped away from them... As someone who was drawn to literary SF by the short fiction of Stephen Baxter and Greg Egan, I'm not sure how this is supposed to translate into a willingness to engage with the aspirational narratives of novels like Katherine Addison's *The Goblin Emperor* or most of the stuff published under the rubric of Young Adult fiction. I understand the urge to throw up boundaries and explain how 'that stuff' is different to 'this stuff' but personal preferences are not objective and attempts to bolster your preferences through appeals to legitimacy and purity tap into a set of cultural energies that can turn very ugly very quickly.

Few things take a moral edge better than the rhetoric of aesthetic purity. It doesn't take much to move from expressing frustration with the current state of your chosen cultural scene to arguing that things used to be objectively better and from there it is nothing but a hop, skip and a jump to the conclusion that the best way to improve things is to purify the scene by kicking out all of the interlopers, carpet-baggers, and wrong-heads. Peruse the proclamations issued by the Hugo ballot-stuffing Sad Puppies and you will see a defensible call to celebrate unfashionable story forms getting lost amidst calls for purification based upon age, race, gender, sexuality, and politics. As with Gamer Gate or any other moral crusade you care to mention, calls for purity inevitably attract people who are more interested in the act of purification than the thing they claim to be purifying, and so the crusades stop being about corrupt games journalism or the lack of space opera on the Hugo ballot and transform into something much darker and uglier.

I don't think that 'Core SF' is inherently racist, sexist, or homophobic but using the rhetoric of cultural purity to help sell certain types of book legitimises the use of that rhetoric elsewhere and perpetuates the myth that some voices are superior simply by virtue of having been around for longer. 'Science Fiction' is a term with no fixed meaning and it will continue to re-invent itself as it always has. Read what you want by all means but tradition and legitimacy are terrible standpoints from which to defend anything, let alone a future-facing literature like science fiction.

NINA ALLAN'S TIME PIECES

DOCTOR CHANGE OR DOCTOR DIE

It's hardly a secret that the novelist A.L. Kennedy is a *Doctor Who* fan. She's spoken about her lifelong love of the programme on multiple occasions, she's referenced it in her fiction, and this year sees the fulfilment of her long-held wish to write something set in the Whoniverse with the publication of her *Doctor Who* tie-in novel *The Drosten's Curse*. "In a literary landscape of nervous agents and terrified publishers, where no risk can be taken and the next novel should be like the last novel that did well, or a mash-up of two that did quite well, or a version of a version of something that had solid sales in 2010, literate sci-fi may be the only arena where the wild, surprising and wonderful can hide," Kennedy wrote on the Guardian Books blog earlier this summer. "For me, like many other people, the Doctor was the beginning of thinking outside the standard boxes provided. As with all good sci-fi, the Who stories allow us to view our world and our habits and our species in an anthropological manner."

This is exactly the kind of open and inclusive attitude I have come to expect from Kennedy, who I admire as one of the UK's most original and outspoken writers. Which is what made it all the more disappointing and surprising to learn of the view she expressed at this year's Edinburgh Festival: that Doctor Who should never be played by a woman.

"As a heterosexual woman, I have no interest in a female Doctor. He's kind of got a guy vibe, the Doctor. A hopeless, undomestic, dozy, dreamy guy-type of eccentricity. It's not a girl-type of eccentricity. I'd be surprised if he changed gender," Kennedy added. I'd be the last person to demand that Kennedy be shot down in flames for saying something so silly – people being shot down in flames is increasingly a cause for concern within science fiction these days, and the last thing we need is more of it – and it's good to remember that these were words spoken in response to an off-the-cuff question at a book festival, not a considered essay setting out the author's worldview from here to eternity. What she said did set me thinking, though. It's clear that Kennedy was speaking from a place of nostalgia – the description of the Doctor as having a "guy vibe" has, I suspect, far more to do with her own memories of watching the show in the seventies and eighties than with any inherent prejudice towards what constitutes "girl-type" eccentricity as opposed to "undomestic dreamy guy-type eccentricity". (Oh dear…)

Kennedy has rightly identified *Doctor Who* as providing a "place of safety" for people who as children felt "small and powerless and undefended". For Kennedy as for many of us, the show is culturally and even politically important. For her to then apply such an arbitrary, closed-minded and exclusionary prescription to *Who* seems to directly contradict her own more constructive, progressive understanding of what science fiction is actually for.

Sadly, Kennedy is not alone in allowing childhood memories to dictate the shape of adult reality. I was pretty much flabbergasted when a colleague and friend of mine, chatting to me at a convention around the end of the Matt Smith era, stated in the strongest terms that the choice of a woman Doctor for any future incarnation would be an outrage. I honestly thought they were winding me up (unsurprisingly I have friends who try to do this) and it came as a genuine shock to my system when I realised they were serious: in this friend's eyes, the idea of the Doctor being anything other than a heterosexual white guy was pretty much taboo. It would ruin the programme, they said. It wouldn't be *Doctor Who* any more.

It would be easy to wave these questions aside as unimportant. It's just a TV show, after all, and a kids' TV show at that. Which is precisely why it matters, of course. Millions of people worldwide watch *Doctor Who*. For many younger viewers the programme is, as Kennedy correctly identified, a place of safety, a refuge where hopes, dreams and fears are actualised and grappled with. Stories are important, stories are vital. Is it not equally vital that such wildly popular, widely disseminated stories as *Doctor Who* reflect equally the voices, faces, and predicaments of those who place their trust in them?

Even if we look at *Doctor Who* purely from its own (admittedly very shaky) science fictional standpoint, to maintain that the Doctor somehow has to be some hyper-bumbling British bloke in Marks & Spencer's underwear is patently ridiculous. According to the show's

firmly-established mythos, Doctor Who is an *alien*. Doctor Who is centuries old, a being from a planet called Gallifrey who can regenerate into a new bodily form in order to prolong their life as and when convenient or necessary. Is there some mysterious pre-set menu of regeneration options we've not been told about? Must be Caucasian, must have a sense of humour moulded by unrelenting childhood exposure to *The Goodies* and other supposedly iconic media manifestations of the 1970s, *must have penis*?

I don't think so. For a trans-dimensional being like the Doctor, such arbitrary restrictions on their freedom of bodily expression would surely be not only baffling but belittling?

There's also a wider point to be made here, about the possibilities and permutations of science fiction in general. If SF had a job description, surely it would be to make people sit up and take notice, to propel its audience out of complacency and towards new ideas? To be something that has, in A.L. Kennedy's words, a jolt of risk and life about it? On the question of gender identity, the current widely-held default assumption is that gender is fixed, binary and biologically determined. Yet this is an assumption only, built up and

If SF had a job description, surely it would be to make people sit up and take notice, to propel its audience out of complacency and towards new ideas? To be something that has, in A.L. Kennedy's words, a jolt of risk and life about it?

reinforced through centuries of subtle and not-so-subtle societal pressures and micro-oppressions. If it is at least partly the job of literature to challenge such assumptions, then surely science fiction should be in the vanguard of that vanguard?

My first encounters with ideas about gender fluidity came through science fiction. I have very clear memories of reading, as a young teenager, John Varley's Eight Worlds story 'Options', in which an overworked mother of three living on a lunar colony decides to avail herself of the latest body-modification technology and spend some time as a man. Her personal journey from being Cleo through living as Leo to becoming Nile made a strong impression, and I reread the story on more than one occasion, trying to work out what I thought about it and naturally asking myself the question: if such a technology were really available, would I use it?

In the light of current gender politics and transexuality, Varley's stories can seem oversimplified, quick fixes – yet they remain interesting and important, not so much for how they tried to express themselves but for the fact that they expressed themselves at all. Ursula Le Guin's novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* was more complex, more rigorous in its examination of gender roles and of the idea of gender in general. It expressed ideas I'd never had to grapple with before, and in a language and form that made reading *The Left Hand of Darkness* a mind-expanding experience at both the literary and intellectual level.

More recently, writers such as Tanith Lee, Rachel Pollack, Roz Kaveney, Ann Leckie and Jennifer Marie Brissett have brought issues of gender, sexual identity and the body politic firmly into the foreground of science fiction literature. Other, newer writers are already following in their footsteps. Surely the Doctor should at the very least be sitting up and taking notice? The fans certainly should, anyway.

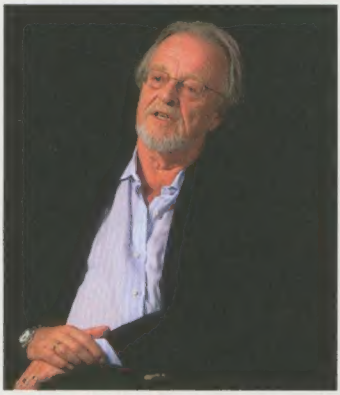
Science fiction as we are used to seeing it on our TV screens and in our cinemas is often a derivative genre, lamentably lacking in the radicalism and originality of the novels and stories that spawned it. *Doctor Who*, unfortunately, is one of the worst offenders. The programme's storylines were seldom what you'd call groundbreaking in science fictional terms, and new-Who's increasing tendency to recycle old monsters, old nemeses, disturbingly familiar settings, even, has left it feeling bereft of ideas, about as far from the radical end of SF as the Earth is from Betelgeuse. Instead of gazing complacently into the mirror, *Doctor Who*'s writers and showrunners would do us all a favour by looking outwards, into the world of new contemporary science fiction writing and into the wider world itself.

Let's do the time warp again? How about let's not.

DAVID LANGFORD'S ANSIBLE LINK

John Carpenter won a plagiarism suit against Luc Besson – plus his co-writers and the production company EuropaCorp – based on the close resemblance between Carpenter's *Escape from New York* (1981) and *Lockout* (2012), which has essentially the same plot relocated into space. The French court verdict noted many similarities; EuropaCorp was ordered to pay a modest €80,000. (Indiewire.com)

Awards. *Arthur C. Clarke Foundation Imagination in Service to Society Award:* Margaret Atwood. • *British Fantasy Awards.* Anthology: *Lightspeed: Women Destroy Science Fiction* ed. Christie Yant. Artist: Karla Ortiz. Collection: Adrian Cole, *Nick Nightmare Investigates.* Comic/Graphic Novel: Emily Carroll, *Through the Woods.* Fantasy Novel: Frances Hardinge, *Cuckoo Song.* Film/TV: *Guardians of the Galaxy.* Horror Novel: Adam Nevill, *No One Gets Out Alive.* Independent Press: Fox Spirit Books. Magazine/Periodical: *Holdfast*, ed. Laurel Sills and Lucy Smee. Newcomer: Sarah Lotz for *The Three.* Nonfiction: *Letters to Arkham: The Letters of Ramsey Campbell and August Derleth, 1961–1971*, ed. S.T. Joshi. Novella: Stephen Volk, 'Newspaper Heart' (*Spectral Book of Horror Stories*). Short Story: Emma Newman, 'A Woman's Place' (*Two Hundred and Twenty-One Baker Streets*). Special Award: Juliet E. McKenna. • *US National Book Awards* shortlists, Young People's category genre titles: *Bone Gap* by Laura Ruby, *Challenger Deep* by Neal Shusterman and *Nimona* by Noelle Stevenson.

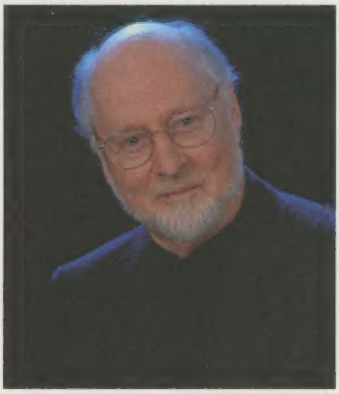


Bernard Cornwell, author of the Saxon Stories novels behind the BBC's new Viking drama series *The Last Kingdom*, had a bash at the perceived opposition, *Game of Thrones*: 'So many characters. So many strands. You have to have large sections where the plot is explained; just have to sit there and be told what's going on. / This is very, very dull. So they put a lot of naked women behind it all … They're called "sexplanations" in the trade. My programmes won't need sexplanations.' (*Independent*)

The Weakest Link. Q: 'The manager of the England football team between 1994 and 1996 was Terry who?' A: 'Pratchett.' (BBC1, *Decimate*) Q: 'This novel by Sinclair Lewis made fun of religious fundamentalism.' A (miraculously getting the right initials): 'What is *Ender's Game*?' (*Jeopardy*)

James Sallis, noted author of crime fiction and of sf since the Moorcock *New Worlds* era, resigned as adjunct professor at Phoenix College, Arizona – where he'd taught creative writing for fourteen years – on being suddenly required to sign a loyalty oath. (12news.com)

As Others Hire Us. A London Barbican job ad for an assistant curator stipulated that 'knowledge of the science fiction genre in the areas of contemporary art, design, film and music is desirable.' (artsjobs.org.uk) Books are so twentieth century.



John Williams, US composer of theme music for many genre films including *Star Wars*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Superman*, *Jurassic Park*, the *Harry Potter* sequence etc, will receive the American Film Institute's lifetime achievement award for 2016 – the first composer to be so honoured. (BBC)

Jack Eason, a previously little-known sf author, achieved global fame with his Amazon review of the all-women space opera anthology *Dark Beyond the Stars*: 'I'm sorry to offend fifty percent of the population but it has to be said that when it comes to writing Science Fiction, it still remains a purely male domain. […] I applaud the ladies for giving it a

try, but I would suggest they forget going any further. Leave the genre to those of us who know how to write scifi, being well versed in it's many nuances.' (via *The Mary Sue*)

As Others See Us. 'Tickets for the new *Star Wars* film go on sale today, so we'll be talking to assorted oddballs in the queue later.' (BBC Radio 5Live) • When Harry Rowohlt won the Kurd Laßwitz Prize for translating Kurt Vonnegut's *Timequake*, he feared the presentation audience must inevitably include 'two thousand trekkies, all wearing Spock ears. Eeek. [...] And there was no prize money, either.' (Harry Rowohlt, *In Schlucken-zwei-Spechte*, 2002)

Stephen King was among this year's recipients of the US National Medal of Arts from President Obama. (NPR)

James T. Kirk was briefly prevented from boarding a flight at Heathrow when revealed as a mutant imitator of the USS *Enterprise* captain: former Scottish first minister Alex Salmond, an avowed Trekkie who likes to travel incognito. 'I just wanted BA to "beam me up, Scotty"', he hilariously explained. (*Guardian*)

Carpe Diem. With an eye on the coming film, the Royal Mail issued no fewer than eighteen *Star Wars* stamps on 20 October. (BBC)

As Others Remember Us. 'Ants are Morlocks and aphids are Eloi! Similar to the storyline in H.G Well's "Journey to the Center of the Earth", all is not well in the world of ants and aphids.' (*Exe Box Bulletin 21*, sic)

Netwatch. The web domains bladerunnerandroidsdreammovie.com and androidsdreammovie.com were registered 'by a company long used by Warner Bros', leading to obvious guesses at the title of the coming *Blade Runner* sequel. (*Independent*)

Christopher Eccleston was asked if he'd watched Peter Capaldi's Doctor: 'I never watched

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Doctor Who when I was a child … I never watched MYSELF as Doctor Who!' (*Radio Times*) • Meanwhile Capaldi imagines his postdoctoral future: 'one day I'll just be an overweight has-been, trying to get a meeting with Jenna Coleman [Clara, the Doctor's companion] and being ejected from a Doctor Who Convention in Bolton for being drunk and disorderly. I mean, this is surely my high point, isn't it?' (*Telegraph*)

As Others See Terry Pratchett. Jonathan Jones tried to cause a stir and succeeded: 'It does not matter to me if Terry Pratchett's final novel is a worthy epitaph or not, or if he wanted it to be pulped by a steamroller. I have never read a single one of his books and I never plan to. Life's too short. / No offence, but Pratchett is so low on my list of books to read before I die that I would have to live a million years before getting round to him. […] Because life really is too short to waste on ordinary potboilers.' (*Guardian*)

Thog's Masterclass. *True Romance Dept.* 'His working hypothesis was that the breakup of the moon had made Doob young again, exfoliating layers of emotional callus from his soul and leaving a pink shiny impressionable heart just waiting to be colonized by the first appealing woman who came along.' (Neal Stephenson, *Seveneves*, 2015) • *Channelling Stephen R. Donaldson.* 'The Operandi works provided we recharge the Lacuna every nine years by luring a gullible Engifted into a suitable orison…' (David Mitchell, *Slade House*, 2015) • *Eyeballs in the Sky.* 'Franklin left his eyes on the floor, took half a step backward.' (Kelli Stanley, *City of Dragons*, 2010) • *Dept of Neat Tricks.* 'The wind was shrieking, and so were her legs.' (*Ibid*)

R.I.P.

Jean Darling (1922–2015), US actress and mystery writer who contributed horror/fantasy stories to *Fantasy Book*, *Night Cry* and *Whispers*, died on 4 September aged 93.

Dave Gibson, co-proprietor with Ted Ball of London's well-loved Fantasy Centre bookshop from its 1969 founding until he retired to Scotland in 1991, died on 21 October.

Árpád Göncz (1922–2015) Hungarian politician who was President of Hungary 1990–2000 and also translated many English works including *Frankenstein*, *The Lord of the Rings* and multiple titles by William Golding, died on 6 October; he was 93.

Göran Hägg (1947–2015), Swedish author whose considerable output included three satirical sf novels – *Det automatiska paradiset* ('The Automatic Paradise', 1979); *Doktor Elgcrantz eller Faust i Boteå* ('Doctor Elgcrantz, or Faust in Boteå', 1983) and *Anders och Dafne* ('Anders and Daphne', 1987) – died on 30 September aged 68.

Gordon Honeycombe (1936–2015), UK newsreader for ITN, playwright, actor and author of the supernatural horror novels *Neither the Sea Nor the Sand* (1969) and *Dragon Under the Hill* (1972), died on 9 October; he was 79.

Jor (Marjorie) Jennings, US fan who began publishing sf with 'The Devil and All Her Works' (1978 *Galaxy*) and was a quarterly winner in the first Writers of the Future contest (1984), died on 27 August.

Warren Murphy (1933–2015), US author who with Richard Sapir created and largely co-wrote the long-running Destroyer sf/superman thriller sequence that began with *Created: The Destroyer* (1971), died on 4 September aged 81.

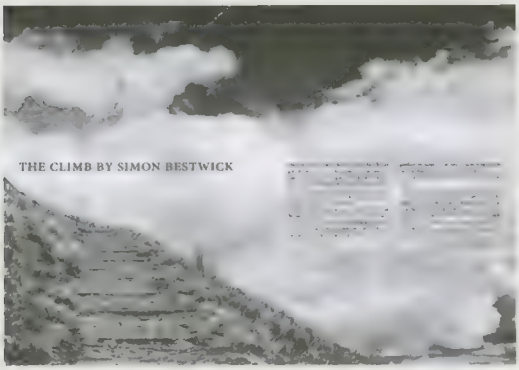
Liviu Radu (1948–2015), respected Romanian sf author and translator, died on 16 October aged 66. He translated novels by Asimov, Gaiman, Koontz, George R.R. Martin, Merritt and Miéville.

Lennart Sörensen (1936–2014), Swedish critic, translator, academic and editor active in sf 1956–1963 (especially in the magazine *Häpna!*) and helping to establish the genre's importance in Sweden, died on 18 May 2014.

Jeremy P. Tarcher (1932–2015), US publisher whose Jeremy P. Tarcher Inc nonfiction line (now a Penguin Group imprint) published Alexei and Cory Panshin's *The World Beyond the Hill* (1989) and other books on sf, died on 20 September aged 83.

Don West (1945–2015), UK artist, writer and critic who signed his work D. West, died on 25 September aged 70. His sardonic cartoons and increasingly ambitious cover art enlivened many fanzines and won numerous awards since the 1970s. A professional venture was 'The Pit' in *Gollancz/Sunday Times Best SF Stories* (1975).

Paul West (1931–2015), UK-born US novelist, essayist and critic whose considerable output included fantasy – e.g. *Colonel Mint* (1973) – and absurdist sf shorts and fables, died on 18 October age 85.



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FIVE CONVERSATIONS WITH MY DAUGHTER (WHO TRAVELS IN TIME) BY MALCOLM DEVLIN

ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD WAGNER

1.
CARRIE WAS SIX WHEN SHE FIRST TOLD ME SHE COULD TRAVEL IN TIME

I was sleeping on the sofa that night. Lauren wouldn't let me in the bedroom. She wanted me out of the house, but I'd talked her down. I'd told her I would need time to find somewhere else to go and she'd said I could stay at Kirsty-from-work's place if I liked her so goddamn much. I tried to come up with a retort that would make me sound like the grown-up, but she shut the bedroom door in my face before I could say anything at all. I waited outside instead and listened to her holding her breath on the other side. She was upset with me, but she wasn't going to let me hear her cry.

Carrie found me in the lounge. I'd taken some spare bedclothes from the airing cupboard and had made a fair fist of assembling a bed on the two-seater Chesterfield. I was lying there, stripped to my boxers and reading a paperback Lauren had left on the coffee table, when I became aware of the small figure in the doorway.

"Mummy's sad," Carrie said and I put the paperback down and pulled myself up to a sitting position, patting the seat of the sofa beside me.

Carrie bounded up onto it and sat there, snuggling up to me. I looped the blanket around us both.

"You should talk to her," she said.

"Tried that, kiddo," I said. "She'll be okay. She just needs a bit of time."

"She might need less time if you talked to her, Dad," she said. "You should never wait to be forgiven."

And there was the slip that made me frown.

"Since when did you call me Dad?" I said. Until then it had always been Daddy and the abbreviated term sounded alien when pronounced with her six-year-old voice.

She pushed off me and looked at me seriously, and again her expression was subtler than I'd ever seen it before. Carrie was still at an age where her emotions were unfiltered, but here she was being serious, in that contrived way adults occasionally adopt when they talk to someone younger or slower.

"Probably when I was about fourteen," she said. "Louise O'Dowd heard me calling after Mummy in the school playground and she wouldn't let me forget it for the next two years. I'd hear much worse, but there and then, I demoted you both. One syllable each, and even then only under sufferance."

I blinked at that.

"Look who swallowed a dictionary," I said.

She didn't laugh. She didn't pull a face. She didn't punch me in the shoulder and go "Da-ddy" like she normally did when I made fun of her. And it struck me how the memory she'd described was already stale to her. It had been supplanted by an anecdote, polished over time so it shone brighter than the truth ever had. She looked at me, small-smiled, sharp-eyed.

"I have a secret," she said. "And you must promise not to tell anyone, not even me."

"I don't understand."

"Right now I'm six years old," Carrie said, "but I'm also older. Older even than you are now. Just for now, two points in my life have converged."

It was a game, I was sure of it. Carrie always was one for imaginative play. Little wonder as she spent so much time on her own. My work started early and ended late, so sometimes I'd only ever see her at weekends.

Ever since she could speak, she would tell us tall stories, spotted with beautiful, accidental, moments of the profound and the surreal. She was a storyteller unmoored from the gravity of realism, and she would look up at us, her eyes bright. "When I was a little girl," she would say, and she'd point to me, "you were there and you were delivering packages, only you weren't on a motorbike, you were on a dragon called Mr Spotty." Or she'd point to Lauren and say, "You could fly. And you were still a nurse but you had wings. Only they fell off and you were sad. So the doctors put them back and then you weren't sad anymore." She'd relate what she'd done the previous day, sometimes incorporating her best friend into the narrative. "We went to Cornwall and Leonora was there, and we played on the beach. And Leo and me built a castle out of the sand and it was bigger than the house and my bedroom was at the top and it had a garden. And the birds came from far, far away and they sang. They sang all day. And we made records."

But they were improvisational fantasies and if Lauren were to question her about what she'd already said, she'd simply make them up anew. The beach wouldn't be a beach, it would be a

forest, it wouldn't be in Cornwall, it would be in Wales. They wouldn't be birds, they'd be bears…

But there, on the sofa, she looked at me patiently and repeated what she'd said.

"I'm six years old," she said, "but I'm also older. Older than you are now. Two points, converged."

"Carrie—"

"I shouldn't be telling you this," she said. "But I'm going to need your help. Listen. In my future, we've discovered a way to travel in time, but it's limited. We can only travel back down the paths we've already forged ourselves. Unspooling our personal history until we find the place we need to go. Even then, we can only stay for a little while and only when our old self is unconscious. It's dangerous, we need to be away by the time they wake or lasting damage might occur, but it's real. And it works."

How do you respond when your six-year-old daughter talks to you like that? I barely said anything. I wondered if I was frightened of her; my only reference point for kids sounding too adult were those horror movies where children become possessed by something violent and horrifying.

"There's something I need to change," Carrie said. "But I'm not going to be able to do it on my own. We need to calibrate so I can judge the right time, so I might be in and out. I'll be back later on and I'll talk to you again, so if you have questions, save them. And don't tell anyone about this. Not Mum, not even me. Do you promise?"

I stared into those eyes, so sincere, so strong. She had her mother's eyes and the thought was abrasive like a friction burn.

"Do you promise?" she said again.

"Yes," I said. "Of course," I said.

She leaned forward and kissed me on the cheek, then she laid her head on my shoulder and like that, I could feel she was asleep.

We sat there for a moment together. I listened to the clock ticking heavily in the lounge and the way the rhythm of her sleep-breathing seemed to fall into time with it. Then I gathered her up in my arms, wrapping the blanket around her and I carried her back upstairs to her room.

She shifted in my arms.

"Daddy," she murmured. A protest, a greeting, an explanation.

"Go back to sleep," I said. "You've been sleep-walking is all."

2.

The phone went and Kirsty answered it. She passed me the handset, a frown on her face.

"It's your daughter," she said, and she arched her eyebrows in that way of hers.

It was one in the morning and both of us were still awake. I took the handset and bundled out of bed, carrying it downstairs, held before me as though I expected it to bite. Kirsty called after me, but I ignored her.

"Carrie?" I said.

"I haven't got long," Carrie's voice said. "I never did sleep well when you were out of the house."

"Carrie, how did you get this number?"

"I know where you are," she said. "At this point, Mum doesn't, but she will. I won't tell her but it will all come out and it'll be messy, but I think you know that already."

Six weeks had passed since I'd last spoken to the other Carrie, and as the time had gone on, it had felt less real to me. My Carrie, everyday Carrie, was no different than she had been before. Maybe I watched her closer than I once had, but her preoccupations were those of any young child who engages with the trivial with the utmost seriousness.

But I caught myself willing it to happen again. I'd been meaning to move out of the house sooner, but I made excuses to hang around instead. Putting Carrie to bed at night, I'd check at the door to see if she was asleep, then I'd stay awake downstairs, listening for her delicate footstep outside.

Lauren lost patience with me. And she'd made a stand.

"I can only look after one child," she said to me, shaking with anger. "You either grow up, or you go away."

I've learned the hard way that ultimatums like that are dangerously loaded. If I'd tried to assure her I really was the responsible adult she wanted me to be, she would have only heard a petulant whine, an unlicensed promise, poorly deployed.

The right answer was the wrong answer plus

time to repent, even if it could only look like the wrong answer in isolation. Lauren cried when I left. I held her and promised that when I came back I'd be a better person for her and for Carrie. That gave her hope, I think.

I moved out, which was a good move. I moved into Kirsty's, which was a stupid one.

"Are you going to tell me about the future?" I said to Carrie.

"No," Carrie said. "You don't need to know anything about it."

"You say that," I said, "but some lottery numbers wouldn't hurt."

"Don't push it, Dad."

Dad.

I stood there for a moment, listening to the weight of her breath, filtered through the receiver, trying to gauge the differences between it and the Carrie I knew.

"I don't understand how this is happening," I said.

"It's complicated," Carrie said. "But the technology is expensive to run. I don't know how long I'll have the right to use it. So I don't think we should waste it."

"You're doing alright, then?" I said and wished I hadn't. It felt so crass. "Are you happy?" I said instead.

I heard impatience in her voice and it didn't quite fit, sounding like something childish repurposed into something parental.

"You asked me about time travel when I wasn't asleep, didn't you?" she said. "I remember this weird conversation with you when I was small—"

"I'm sorry—"

"You promised you wouldn't talk about it."

"I know," I said. "It just didn't feel real to me. You said you wanted me to help you. I'm sorry."

"I do want you to help," she said. "But not yet. When the time comes I just need to know that you'll do as I ask."

"Anything."

There was a pause. A long pause, stretched longer by the impossibility we found ourselves in. These were not seconds gaping between us, but years, decades, more.

"Well," I said. "I'll be waiting for you anyway. Whenever you're back. When the clock strikes thirteen or whatever."

"What are you talking about?"

"*Tom's Midnight Garden*," I said. "It's a children's book. Time travel. It's sweet."

"I've not read it," Carrie said.

There was another pause, this one longer, made heavy by things neither of us could bring ourselves to say.

"Can you tell me what it's like?" I said. "Time travel."

"Do you remember the crosswords I used to do with Mum?"

"No," I said. "I don't think you've started doing that yet."

"We have," Carrie said. "You just haven't noticed. Anyway, there was one I remembered. The clues were something like: Six across, see fifteen down. Fifteen down, see six across. Both were seven letters and there were no other clues, only the other words that crossed each of them. That's what time travel feels like. Two clues in different directions that you have to solve at the same time. Sometimes you just need to be brave enough to risk getting it wrong."

After she hung up, I took the phone back upstairs again. I put on my shirt and told Kirsty I would have to find somewhere else to stay.

She stared at me from the bed.

"You're an asshole," she said. "Did you know that?"

I nodded. "Apparently. Guess I'll learn to live with it."

"You don't learn to live with being an asshole," Kirsty said. "You figure out how to stop."

She turned off the bedside light and let me find my way out in the dark.

3.

I found a flat down the road from the house and moved in. At the depot, I worked extra hours until there was enough good will amongst the management to allow me to rearrange my shifts with other riders so I could spend more time with Carrie and Lauren. I still saw Kirsty around the office, but she didn't really talk to me anymore. Even over the radio, her voice sounded as terse as a recorded message.

Lauren started to ask me to babysit when she

was out on call. To begin with, I was her last resort, but with good behaviour and plenty of time, I edged my way up her list.

I bought a copy of *Tom's Midnight Garden* and started reading it to Carrie the next time I was over. It was a little old for her, perhaps, a little old fashioned, but it was different and it was something of our own.

"What happens next?" Carrie said when I closed the book the first time.

"You can find out next time," I said.

"But I want to know now."

I thumbed to the last page and started scanning the paragraphs to refresh my memory. Carrie's hand shot out and snatched the book from me.

"You can't skip to the end." Her expression was scandalised. "We have to read the whole thing, otherwise it won't make any sense."

I stared back at her, disoriented and amused.

"Well," I said. "We can ask Mummy if she'll read you more tomorrow."

A few days later, Lauren called me.

"I don't know what you're up to," she said, "but it seems to be working."

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Carrie wants you to read to her before she goes to bed." At first I thought she was angry with me, but I could have sworn I could hear the way she smiled.

Carrie and I finished reading *Tom's Midnight Garden* over the next couple of weeks, and even before we were done I found myself in the library, lining up something new to read her next.

"You're like Scheherazade," the other Carrie said when I next saw her. "Always have to keep another story in your pocket in case you fall out of favour."

I was babysitting that night. I'd had a call from Lauren saying she had to get back to work because the maternity unit was short staffed, so I went straight to the house after work, parking the bike out on the lawn where it always used to live.

I was watching the end of the news on the television when Carrie came bounding down the stairs at a run. She surprised me by doing a cartwheel across the carpet, an imperfect one, all legs and arms and flying hair, but when she landed she was grinning wildly.

"God," she said, "I forgot just how much fun that was. I forgot I used to find them so easy to do."

Next, she did a handstand up against the wall, laughing at me upside down through the hair that had fallen over her face. She did roly-polies across the floor and I helped her manage some semi-summersaults, my hands on her waist so she wouldn't fall. I picked her up and flew her around the lounge and she whooped with the simple joy of it.

"Won't this wake you up?" I said afterwards.

She was sitting beside me on the sofa, wearing my motorcycle leathers, which looked so big on her I'd told her she looked like she'd shrunk in the wash.

"I am awake," she said. "You're not going to wake *her* unless I go away again. It's complicated."

She glanced at the dark window.

"Such a shame I can only come here at night," she said. "Maybe you should chloroform her one day and we can go for a walk. Go up a mountain. Go to the beach." She sighed. "I would love to run in the sand again."

"That would be fun explaining to your mother," I said.

Carrie's laugh faltered when she spotted the book on the coffee table. *Tom's Midnight Garden*, its spine creased and bent back. She picked it up and ran her fingers over the pages with a curious reverence.

"I remember you reading me this," she said and smiled. "When I was in my twenties, I was living alone in this horrible little flat and this cat adopted me. Rake thin, black fur, the most beautiful eyes. I called it Tom and everyone just assumed I was thinking cat equals tomcat and that I had no imagination whatsoever, but I called him Tom because he went out in the garden at midnight and I'd imagine him having all kinds of adventures."

I realised I was holding my breath. That little glimpse of her life felt so precious and delicate, I felt anything I said would be clumsy enough to break it.

"Did you live alone long?" I said eventually.

"I'm not telling you anything about the future," she said. "I just mentioned I had a cat once. I don't think that counts. I've always liked cats after all."

She set the book back down on the table and shrugged off the jacket.

"I don't think you should ride bikes anymore," she said.

"It's sort of what I do," I said. "It's something I'm good at. Fastest motorcycle courier in the county."

I grinned. It was supposed to be a joke but it was poorly aimed.

"Your mum and me used to ride together," I said. "When we first met, we'd get on the bike and we'd just take off, see how far we could get. I had this crappy little Suzuki at the time, but it got us to Cumbria and the North York Moors and Scotland. Long, windy roads, barely any traffic. We howled along them as good as flying. And when you've got two people on a bike, they have to hold onto each other for the whole trip. It's beautiful really. Most intimate way you can travel."

Carrie made a noise that might have been a laugh had it been better behaved.

"She was holding onto you," she said. "You did all the driving and she was holding on for dear life. Not the same thing at all."

I shrugged.

"Well she seemed to like it at the time."

"But you could get a different job," Carrie said. "Maybe something in an office."

I looked at her closely.

"Is this a warning about my future?" I said, only half-joking.

She gave me a dark look, heavy with irony.

"Not at all," she said. "You die in a terrible office-related-accident and I'm just trying to hurry it along."

I blinked at that.

"Joke," she said.

4.

Time passed, the years stacked up. Everyday Carrie grew steadily and greedily, and I managed to forget about the other Carrie and her occasional visits because my preoccupations became exclusively with the moment-to-moment. When I thought about the future, they were specific, administrative futures. Schools, money, health. The future of the other Carrie seemed too far away to concern myself with.

At work, Kirsty announced she was getting married to a man she'd met online. He lived in Colorado and she'd only met him the once, but by that point she'd spent most of her career talking to the riders almost exclusively over the radio and so falling in love over the internet felt admirably logical to her. The day before she left for the States, she baked a carrot cake and presented pieces to each of us when we returned to the depot. Even when she saw me, her smile was so broad, her eyes so bright with excitement, I could see that any history between us had been utterly and beautifully eclipsed by a future that looked to her like a fairy tale.

A few months later, the company was sold to a competitor on the far side of the county. Most of the old management were fired, but they wanted to keep the couriers. They offered me a new bike, more routes, more distance, more long and windy roads to fly down, but I declined and took a job in the local sorting office instead, where the work was dull and static but the hours were easy and I could get home for half past six each night.

On Carrie's ninth birthday Lauren asked me to move back in.

"If nothing else, to save a bit of money," she said. "You're here most of the time anyway, and that flat may as well be storage for all you use the bloody thing."

I said yes. Of course I said yes.

It became apparent to me how similar Lauren and Carrie had become, or perhaps how similar they'd always been. Sometimes it felt as though Carrie was a part of Lauren, an exploratory shoot, an independent growth. And I realised I had become happily dependent on having the two of them in my life. Two fixed points from which a sense of perspective can grow. Only Carrie wasn't a fixed point at all, she was two points of her own, one orbiting the other in a widening spiral, starting so close but stretching further and further with every iteration.

One night in early June, I heard movement downstairs. Lauren had fallen asleep on my arm and when I gently extricated myself from her, she shifted.

"What's that?" she said, too quiet, too drowsy to care about an answer.

"Probably the cats," I said, pulling on my dressing gown, but she was back in her dream again and she didn't hear me.

It wasn't the cats. Carrie was in the lounge, tracing her hand over the family pictures on the bookshelves, the new ones I'd installed to carry all the books we'd collected over the years. *Tom's Midnight Garden*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Ballet Shoes*, *I Am David*, so many more. I'd built the shelves a little too wide so the books were set back and the front edges had quickly filled with picture frames, birthday cards, letters and ornaments.

"Sorry it's been so long," she said without turning around. "Work has been stressful. Access to the machine has been difficult. It's…" Her sigh contained years. Those which had passed between us, those she could see ahead of her.

"Complicated," I finished for her.

She shook her head.

"There you go again," she said, "skipping to the end before I can finish."

Her hand stopped on a photograph of the beach where we'd been on holiday a couple of summers earlier. The small figure of Carrie ran across the sand, her delight frozen, a single moment of preserved and ageless joy.

Carrie smiled. "I remember that holiday," she said. "We stayed in that cottage with the face on it."

"Two windows for eyes," I said. "The door for a nose, the little garden fence like teeth."

It had only been the previous summer, but the way she spoke of it was so wistful it sounded as though it was already in danger of being forgotten. It had been a tense holiday, I had only been invited to go at the last moment, but we played house together convincingly enough, and later I wondered if it had been a test by Lauren to see if she wanted me around more.

"I thought it was a happy face," Carrie said. "I saw it smiling. It was welcoming and friendly. But you and Mum thought it was scary. I remember that too."

"We thought it was sad," I said. "Less to do with the face, more of a feeling in the place."

"Well if I can travel in time, who says others can't too?" She turned back to me. "Ghosts are time travellers too, after all."

She smiled.

"You're looking well," she said. "The office job clearly suits you."

"It's a warehouse, and I'm putting on weight," I said. She didn't respond, so I tried something else. "Is it time yet?" I said.

"So impatient. It'll be soon. Very soon."

"Soon as in next week?" I said. "Soon as in next year?"

She cast me a sideways glance.

"From where I'm from," she said, "they're not so dissimilar."

She picked up the school photo which had only been taken the previous month. The frame had two apertures. The oval one showed a portrait of her, smiling wide, a gap in her teeth; the square one showed a group shot of her class. Carrie moved her hand over the glass.

"You know," she said, "I don't remember who most of these people are anymore. It's terrible isn't it how easily we push whole lives aside to make room for new faces?"

Her hand paused, and I craned across to look. A blonde girl on the back row, a slight rabbit-in-the-headlights expression of alarm. Carrie traced the shape of her face with her fingertip, gentle as though she was afraid she might push the girl away.

"That's Leo," I said. "Surely you remember Leo."

"I remember," Carrie said. She set the picture back on the edge of the bookshelf where she'd found it, then she turned around and nearly jumped at me, taking me by surprise. She put her arms around me and held on tightly, burying her face in my chest.

We stood like that in silence for a time. I said nothing, content to just hold her there and let her speak first.

"Daddy," she said.

5.

The phone call came while I was still at work. I was summoned to the office where everyone looked serious and no-one could make eye contact. I was told I could leave whenever I needed so I went straight away, howling across town in the little family Punto, more recklessly than I

ever had when I'd been on a bike.

Lauren had been working that afternoon, so she was already at the hospital when I arrived. She saw me coming down the corridor, her eyes rimmed red, and had I any breath left to give it would have been hers if she'd asked me for it.

It had been an accident, we were told.

There was a new extension being built at the school, we'd both seen the letters that had been sent home: a new library, a new kitchen, a new play area. While the site was closed off, while dire warnings had been issued, Carrie and her friend Leo had taken it upon themselves to find a way inside.

Misadventure, they said. Little Miss Adventure and the daring things she does. Look at her climb to the top of the scaffold. Look at her slip, now watch at her fall.

And now she lay, tiny and broken, in the hospital bed that was far too big for her. Marshmallow white, it held her cupped and I wondered if I envied the way it could effortlessly keep her secure. She was sleeping, one of the nurses told us, but we'd already been filled in on the extent of the damage. We'd seen the X-rays. We'd seen our daughter in cross-section, where there were gaps in the labyrinth of her where there should be no gaps at all.

How do you respond when your eleven-year-old daughter lies like that? I barely said anything. My only reference points were those public information films they used to screen when I was small. Overwrought reconstructions of terrible accidents, miniature horror movies warning children that the beautiful world they lived in wished them harm.

The doctor appeared in the doorway, an apologetic look on her face. Lauren touched my arm and followed her, and as the door closed Carrie opened her eyes and looked directly at me as though she'd been waiting for us to be alone all along.

"Why didn't you tell me to stop you?" I said. My worry had made me angry and I hated myself for it. "Isn't that why you came back? Why didn't you tell me? I could have stopped this."

She said, "This wasn't why I came back."

I sat heavily on the chair by the bed.

"Then I don't understand." Sometimes, it felt as though that it was all I ever said to her. "You," I said. "I mean," I said. "You've hurt yourself," I said. I started to say something else, but I couldn't bring myself to describe what had happened, because sometimes the past felt as clouded and as obscure as the future.

"When I was a little girl," Carrie said, her voice mechanical, dispassionate. "There was an accident and I severely damaged my spine. Since then, I was no longer able to walk unaided and I spent much of my childhood in a chair."

It sounded like she was reciting the biography of someone I didn't know.

"It made me angry," she said. "And my anger made me fight. And if I didn't fight, I would never have been in a position to come back here to talk to you."

She sounded so patient.

"This isn't what needed to change," she said. "I've seen the end of this story and this isn't what needed to be different."

I stood up again, and when I stood over her, she looked like a porcelain ornament that had been dashed on the floor.

"Listen," she said. "Thirty years from now, there will be technology which will help me walk again. I'll walk on hills. In parks. I'll walk on beaches with the sand between my toes."

Her smile wasn't quite convinced. *It's not the same*, she seemed to be saying, *but I'm excited by it*. The time felt insurmountable to me. She was eleven years old. She would have to live her life three more times—

"Don't misunderstand," she said. "This isn't me being a saint. This is me being selfish. This doesn't define me, but I do let it drive me. It's hard. I work hard. But Leo? Leo will be alone. Leo will find it harder."

The name sounds like a gear-change. I stare at her, caught in the middle of a conversation I didn't appreciate we were having.

"You must tell her it wasn't her fault," Carrie said. "And you have to make her believe it. You have to tell her parents. You have to tell everyone. You have to tell me. Because otherwise I won't forgive her until it's far too late."

She stared at me then.

"Do you promise?" she said.

I shook my head.

"This is what you wanted me to do for you?" It seemed so small, so trivial. But her head ducked just a little in confirmation. "But if you'd let me stop you—"

"It doesn't work like that," Carrie said. "I told you. Two clues in different directions."

She closed her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm tired. I'm so very tired. And it's all tangled up and strange and I don't know what's up and what's down anymore and… I remember Mum and me always being close. But everything else is changing and I can't do this now."

She smiled then.

"But I'm happy, too," she said. "Because this time, you and me? Well, we had something to talk about, didn't we?"

I took her hand. It felt too cool, too light. It lay limp in my own palm like it had gone asleep ahead of her.

She smiled again. Her adult smile. It filled her for the briefest moment and then her eyes closed and I watched the expression fade. And there was the sleep-breathing sound, Carrie's sound, everyday Carrie. The rhythm so familiar to me now I could have identified it blindfold in a crowded room.

The door opened and Lauren found me there. She came up to me and put her arm around my waist.

"I heard you talking," she said. Then, incredulous, moved: "Were you praying?"

It was a question that took me by surprise, but I nodded anyway because it didn't feel like a lie. After all, who do we pray to, if not the future we howl towards so recklessly? That long and winding road, along which we can as good as fly if we don't slow down to consider the way. We pray our path will be clear, we pray we do not travel alone.

Lauren and I sat together by the bed. We held each other's hands and watched while our daughter slept in a way that frightened us both.

We will wait there together and we will be there together when she wakes.

This is Malcolm Devlin's third story to appear in *Interzone*. If he had a time machine, he'd use it to get up to date with all the TV box sets he's behind on.

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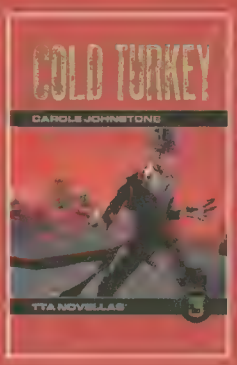

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WE MIGHT BE SIMS

RICH LARSON

On the one year anniversary of their mission, Jasper, naked and angry again, decides they are trapped in a simulation. "Think about it, dumbfucks," he says, pushing both palms against the low metal ceiling, flexing his bone-and-sinew arms. "The launch was just how it is on the flicks, right? All the rumbling, the big countdown, the gravity swing. Just like a movie."

Two meters opposite him, Beatriz is on the drip. A tube snakes into her bruised wrist and a chemical cocktail buries her deep where she lies on the memory foam mat. Beatriz remembers the launch. A guard who liked her Santa Muerte tattoos snuck her a salami baguette, the kind she used to get with her mother at the minimart, as a last supper. She threw it up when they hit zero g and it floated like a rotting balloon.

Beatriz doesn't bother responding to Jasper anymore unless they're fucking. She knows Mack will, anyway, from his corner where he slouches with his bristly white head tipped back against the cold curving wall. Mack always responds,

maybe needing to hear his own voice smack against another, needing echolocation to know he's still alive.

"Did it ever occur to you, Jasper, that the way probes are launched in flicks is based on how they're launched in reality?" Mack asks, shifting the food tray on his lap. Beatriz doesn't mind him responding to Jasper. His voice is deep and buttery, especially when Beatriz is on the drip. She thinks he could have been an actor, or at least narrator for some webdoc, if he hadn't been a criminal.

Beatriz drags her eyes to Jasper, who is scowling in a way he knows looks good on him. He scowled through his hearing, too, and girls from all over the country sent him fleshflash and nudes. "The launch was fake, you ancient faggot," he says. "Whole thing is fake. Why the fuck would they dump money to send three convicts to Europa when there's a billion real people begging to go?"

"Because it's a trial run for the colony ship," Mack says, as he's said before, sectioning his glob of nutrient paste over and over like cell division. "Skeleton crew on minimal life support to babysit the cryopods. The corp's seeing how much they can whittle their margins. Same as always. If it goes balls up and we die, nobody gives a rat's ass, do they?"

Beatriz hopes he'll give up on the paste, thinking maybe she can use it for the smeared mural that takes up a wall-and-a-half, a cloud of grays and browns, blurred faces and contorted feet, with one angry red arc of dried blood from the night she woke up to find Mack cutting his son's name into his arm.

She closes her eyes and listens.

"Exactly," Jasper says. "Margins. What's cheaper than telling us we're in space while they stash us in a bunker to test the life support right here on Earth?"

"We're cheap enough already," Mack says. "We're a tin can full of human detritus."

"What?"

"Detritus."

"Fuck's that—"

"We're human shit."

There's a long pause, then Beatriz hears Jasper's knuckles rap the viewport. "It's all just black out there. If it was real, there'd be stars."

"If it was fake, there'd be stars. Ask Beatriz. Even Beatriz would know that."

"Shut the fuck up, Mack," Jasper says, with a high thrumming anger in his voice. "There should be stars. Bea. Bea, snap to, you dozy cunt."

"She doesn't like it when you call her that," Mack says.

Beatriz feels Jasper's approach, feels him crouch beside her. His fingers prod a familiar bruise on her upper arm. "Beatriz, you cunt, snap to. Should there be stars or not?"

"Fuck off, Jasper," she says, opening her eyes. "Fuck off double, Mack."

The warm amber of the drip is trickling away. She's exhausted her allotment for the day. Just looking at the inky black viewport makes her feel cold again. Both Jasper and Mack are craned forward, waiting on an answer, because in the pod reality is 2/3.

"You'd think there ought to be stars," she finally says. "Yeah."

Mack throws up his veiny hands in disgust.

"Ha," says Jasper. "There should be stars."

Mack slouches off to check for transmissions, but before he does he slides his tray over to where Beatriz is lying. She stretches the corners of her mouth, trying to give a thank-you smile. Mack thinks painting the mural is keeping her sane. Beatriz thinks she's already gone mad.

"Go on, Mack, check the computer," Jasper says, taunting. "I'm sure after six months of not saying a fucking word, they've sent us all Christmas cards. Go on, you old fairy."

Mack's middle finger spears toward the low ceiling, then he claps the headphones on and turns his back. Jasper looks at Beatriz and smirks. He doesn't have the muscle mass he used to, but his hollow cheeks and bony limbs are sexy in their own way, the whittled-down-margins way.

Beatriz grabs a familiar place on his thigh, a stopgap now that the high's leaving. "He's got the headphones on."

"Alright." Jasper rolls his cock in his hand. "Yeah."

Beatriz moves the foam mat toward the corner where they fuck. Jasper never used to care when Mack watched and sometimes stroked off to it. He even clenched his ass extra to show off.

Beatriz unzips her clothes. She gets herself wet

thinking about someone who is nothing like Jasper, then guides him in. She remembers Jasper used to ask questions when they fucked, like, *do you like that?*

And she'd said, *what?*

Hot-cheeked, sullen, *do you like it when I touch your nipples like that?*

Don't really feel it much. Looking down at the knobby scar tissue. *They're all ruined.*

It's sort of endearing, remembering him all horny and schoolboy nervous. Now he fills her like filling an ice tray, and sometimes goes spongy inside her, but it's better than nothing, isn't it, and nothing is creeping all around them.

"I don't think Mack's a real person," Jasper whispers into her sweaty neck.

"You're taking the homophobic streak a little far," Beatriz grunts back.

"No, I mean he's not a real person, because he's someone else," Jasper says.

She can feel him slipping again, losing blood. She repositions herself and clamps hard to him, wishing for a good vibrator for the ten-thousandth time.

"He's a plant," Jasper pants. "He's part of the experiment. There should be stars, Bea."

"Concentrate for me, Jasper."

He squeezes his eyes shut and limps to the finish; Beatriz feels hers all too briefly, just a smatter of sparks against the cold black empty outside. She can't remember if they should be able to see stars or not on a sublight voyage to Europa. Her one astronomy class was up against her lunch period and she rolled ciggies in the parking lot instead.

"We might not even be awake," Jasper says. His deflating cock is chafed and purple. He babies it with his hand like something that might dissolve. "They might just have our brains hooked up to a virtual."

Beatriz considers it. "We might be sims, you mean. Someone's up there pulling our strings and watching us wet ourselves."

Wouldn't that be something, Beatriz thinks. If nothing is real. Maybe nothing has been real for years. She never found that airsoft gun behind the Blinx and used it to jack a phone vendor. She never let old Mr Rocio drown in a slippery bathtub while she sat on the couch with a needle in her arm, too leaded to move even if she could hear his hoarse little shouts.

"But I've got a way to end it," Jasper says, looking back slyly to where Mack still sits facing the screen. There are 2039 songs on the computer. Beatriz guesses, from the slack of his shoulder blades, that Mack is listening to his favorite Finnish instrumentals.

"How?" Beatriz says, even though she knows she won't like the answer.

"I'm going to open the hatch," Jasper says through a corpse-lipped grin. "I've figured out the override. Needs all three of our palm prints. We'll have to get Mack while he's sleeping."

Beatriz rolls off the mat and picks up Mack's discarded tray. She scrapes the paste off and tries to find a good place for pale gray on the mural. A bone, maybe, in the jumbled skeleton emerging over on the left. Jasper tries to talk to her for a few minutes more, then he nods wisely and puts a finger to his lips. He goes to the other wall to put his feet up and eke out push-ups that make his shoulder joint click and crack.

Back when Jasper was still flushed and eager for orgasm, he told her about the boy he killed. The boy was a year younger than him, and smaller, and because of certain things he had said, Jasper had to drag him out of a night club and hit him until those things disappeared. Jasper remembered, vaguely, that it was about a girl, but he didn't remember her name. He remembered that he was losing the fight until someone stuck a cinderblock into his hand, and he remembered that the boy asked him *are you fucking kidding* before his skull crunched down in on itself like a collapsible bowl.

Beatriz supposes there are two outcomes to Jasper's plan. The first outcome is: Everyone dies. The ship feels very real. The omnipresent hum of the life support sometimes still sets her teeth on edge. The cold curve of the walls feels solid under her thumbs and she can smell her smears of old food, insulation gel, bodily fluids. So they will open the hatch and drift into space, and dying will feel very real, too.

The second outcome is harder to predict. Jasper has been right about things before. He was right when he argued against Mack, for hours, that the first casualty of the Second World War

was a Polish farmer. The computer confirmed it later. He was half-right when he argued that Noah Webster had published a Bible, not a dictionary. Maybe he is right that there should be stars, and if they open the hatch the dark of space will fall away. Sheepish scientists will peek at them from behind the green screen background.

Maybe there will be confetti, and the scientists will have party hats. *You figured it out,* they say. *You clever boy. You clever girl. You clever old man.* And then everyone gets to go home: Jasper to his wealthy parents, Mack to his son who hates him, and Beatriz to where? She has an ex-girlfriend, who, when Beatriz said she'd volunteered to swap her life sentence for being hurled into space, told her Europa wasn't far enough away. She has a mother who wept like La Llorona at the news, but was at the same time glad to see Beatriz so neatly excised, a wart removed by sublight shuttle. No more visits to the ER to have her daughter's stomach pumped for pills, no more money dumped into the black hole of cut-rate rehab.

But they won't be sent home anyway. If this is a virtual, if they are sims, then the corp can just wipe out their memory of the past six months and start over again. Maybe they already have.

Either way, Beatriz decides Mack should be allowed to know the two options. When he goes to take his shit, making his soft grunts and old man sighs, Beatriz passes by the waste disposal and tells him that Jasper is going to try to open the hatch when he's asleep.

"Fucking idiot," Mack says.

"He's really sure of it," Beatriz says. "That it's all a sim." She pauses, looking over to where Jasper is still doing push-ups. He watches her like a hawk. "He's, ah, convicted," she says.

Mack barks a laugh at that. "He'll forget about it in a day or two," he says, smearing sanitizer across his hands, his bony ass. "In the meantime, well, it's not as if he can open it without us seeing him. Stopping him."

"Should we?" Beatriz blurts.

Mack's head turns like an owl, and that's what he is, an aging owl. Jasper is a starving hawk. Beatriz doesn't know what bird she is. She's always liked crows, because they eat out of dumpsters without a trace of shame and always seemed to have a friend watching their back, two things Beatriz never got the hang of.

"We've been stuck in here a whole year, Mack," Beatriz says, quietly. "And when we get to Europa, it's just another cell waiting. Plus labor."

"I know that," Mack says. "But your life isn't over yet, for fuck's sakes. I'm old. You and Jasper have time. Even if you can't 180, you can still nudge the course. You can do something worthwhile."

"You have a beautiful voice," Beatriz tells him on impulse. "Like a narrator. Sometimes I pretend we're on a netshow. Guess me and Jasper both do." She lets her gaze drift toward the black window. "Are you sure it's not?"

"If anything was simulated, it was life before this," Mack says. "When we thought we could get away with everything. That wasn't realistic. Not one bit."

Beatriz remembers that Mack was a Family man before he was a family man, and after he stopped doing wet work and found a husband and had a son, he tried to simulate a life where he'd never executed a woman and her boyfriend on the side of a highway. Sims in sims in sims, Beatriz thinks.

"Reality is whatever hurts most," Mack says, and Beatriz sees him scratch, just once, at the scar tissue on his arm where he got four letters into his son's name. She knows better. She knows reality is 2/3.

"I just thought you should know," Beatriz says. "That Jasper wants to open the hatch."

Then she goes back to the mat in the corner and lies down, taking account of all the bones digging into the memory foam. Each one of them is aching for the drip. It would be easiest to just lie here, as the light cycle dusks down for sleeping, and wait for her allotment to renew. Beatriz wonders, sometimes, if her mother and her ex know the real reason she's going to Europa is because sedative dependency is part of the experiment, and whatever chemical they have in the drip is better than medical morphine, nearly as good as street heroin.

Beatriz decides she will lie here. She tells herself it doesn't matter if her, Jasper, and Mack float into space and asphyxiate or not. She won't pick a side.

The pod grows dark. Beatriz closes her eyes. For a while Jasper stands over her and curses at her for telling Mack. Beatriz doesn't reply. Then he leans in close, so his hot breath scalds her, and says that he could kill Mack if he wanted to. Mack's palm print is the same dead or alive. Beatriz stiffens, but she doesn't open her eyes. She feels Jasper leave, and then:

"You're part of it," comes Jasper's voice. "You're part of the experiment, aren't you, Mack? You're studying me like a bug, aren't you, Mack?"

"Calm down, Jasper," comes Mack's voice.

"Tell them to end it. Tell them right now."

"Take your hand off me, you little shit."

Beatriz hears the first punch, and it's not a loud raw meat-locker smack, how punches sound in flicks, but quiet, dull, nearly eclipsed by Jasper's grunt of surprise. A lull, and then Beatriz can hear Jasper shuffle and lunge, can picture his lips peeling back off his perfect white teeth. The crash of their bodies to the floor sends reverberations through the entire pod. Beatriz shakes with it.

She claps her hands over her ears. Jasper won't kill Mack. Jasper and Mack were friends a month ago. Beatriz focuses on the rush of blood through her head, willing herself not to hear the gasps and snarls. But soon there is only one sound: Mack choking.

Beatriz is back sitting on a couch down the hall from the bathroom. She is hearing the weak slap of water on porcelain, stirred by old flailing arms. The wheezing shouts.

Beatriz opens her eyes to see Jasper straddling Mack, knees pinioning his shoulders, both hands wrapped around Mack's neck. Reality is 2/3. She gets up off the mat. Her skin is cold and she's shivering all over.

"Stop it, Jasper," she says. "Get off him."

"I told you, Bea," Jasper grunts. "I told you he's a plant."

Beatriz tries to pry Jasper away, but he shrugs her off. She tries again and finds her head wrenched back by a searing slap. Her ears ring and dark blooms across her vision. When it clears, she sees Mack's contorted face, and that's worse. His eyes are desperate in a way Beatriz hates. She turns and walks back to the drip.

Mack's heels squeal against the floor. Beatriz doesn't look back. She goes to the drip, to the coiled tube that makes certain things disappear. There are dregs of chemical clinging to the inside of it. She reaches and pulls.

And pulls, and pulls, until her shoulder screams at her. Finally, the tube tears free from the wall, flicking its contents across the pod. A droplet touches the stinging flesh of her lip. She shivers on her way back to Jasper and Mack. She doesn't know if there's a way to fix the drip again, and the not knowing puts a deep hollow in her gut, part fear and part something else that's hard to finger.

Beatriz steadies herself behind Jasper, planting her feet. Then she loops the tube around his neck and yanks it tight. He gags.

"Get off him, Jasper," Beatriz says. "He's not a plant. He's one of us, alright?"

Jasper shakes himself like a wet dog, but Beatriz clings, gripping the tube so hard the blood leaves her knuckles. She has a terrible picture of Jasper killing Mack, of her killing Jasper, and then it's only her with two drifting corpses and no drip.

Time is different in the pod, and Beatriz doesn't know how long the three of them are frozen there in tableau, muscles strained, breathing hoarse. But finally, finally, Jasper's hands slip off Mack's neck. The vein at his temple is bulging like a blue worm. Beatriz doesn't have any strength left in her arms, so she lets go of the tubing.

Mack rolls over, coughing.

Jasper sinks to his knees, then onto his stomach, resting his forehead against the cold floor.

Beatriz is the last to fall, feeling a sudden exhaustion as the adrenaline spike leaves. She lies flat on her back, looking up at the black viewport, at the mural lit by dim blue running lights. The spatter from the drip has dried in small gleaming pinpoints all across the wall, winking in the dark.

"Look," Beatriz says. "Stars."

She breathes. Mack breathes. Jasper breathes. They all breathe, and for now the stale air tastes real enough.

Rich Larson was born in West Africa, has studied in Rhode Island and worked in Spain, and at 23 now writes from Edmonton, Alberta. His short work has been nominated for the Theodore Sturgeon Award and appears in multiple *Year's Best* anthologies, as well as in magazines such as *Asimov's*, *Analog*, *Clarkesworld*, *F&SF*, and *Interzone*. Find him at richwlarson.tumblr.com.

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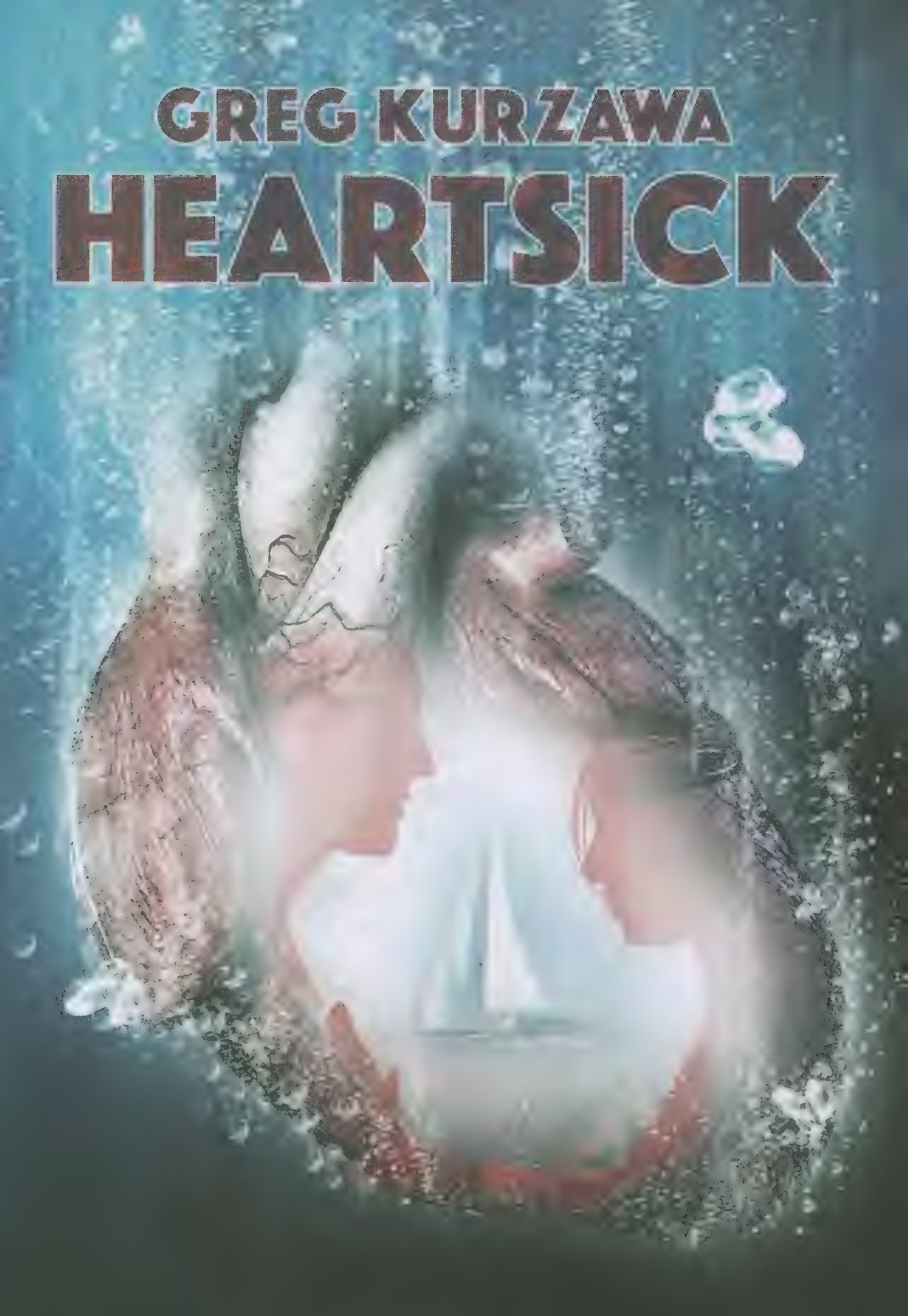

Two weeks after his sixty-third birthday, Martin found himself squirming on the crisp white paper of the examination table. The paper, sensitive to his slightest discomfort, objected to his weak struggles with agitated crackling. Gripping the edges of the table, Martin kept his face turned insistently away from the good doctor Medhira, determined not to watch what was being done to him. But now Medhira was reaching deeper, and Martin found it increasingly difficult to breathe.

"I am seeing the problem," Medhira said, as though it should have been obvious from the start.

"What?" Martin said in mild alarm. "What is it?"

"One moment," the doctor said. "Very soon…"

Though afraid of what he would see, Martin peeked down, almost accidentally – and immediately regretted the decision. Medhira was up to his elbow in Martin's gut. The doctor's invasive reach was compressing his lungs, forcing important things aside. Martin shut his eyes and concentrated on breathing, but his nose filled with the dry, exotic scent of Medhira's skin, and his upper lip beaded with sweat. He twisted a little, but there was no escaping the discomfort.

"Almost is done," Medhira said. He was tugging on something with far-reaching roots.

"Ahh," Martin said, more an expression of distress than pain. The sound made when the rush and swell of true pain threatened, but as yet remained at bay. He pushed lightly on the doctor's shoulder, a warning that he might not willingly endure much more. "Should this hurt?"

"No, no," Medhira said. "Only some."

"*Ahh*," Martin warned him again.

There came a sharp pinch deep in his chest, followed by the swift unraveling of something bound too tightly. Medhira withdrew his arm in one smooth motion, dragging from Martin an involuntary sob. Martin didn't know if this was due to the release of pressure, or to the sudden hollow left by the absence of the doctor's arm, but he felt as though he'd delivered a prodigious bowel movement. He drew a deep, shaking breath, and when he let it out he found – to his surprise – that he wasn't done crying.

Medhira leaned over him, smiling. "Not very bad," he said, as though satisfied with Martin's performance. His sleeve was rolled up past his elbow, his bare arm slick. In one hand he held something dark and wet.

Martin wiped his eyes and pressed a hand to his chest. "Is that…?"

Medhira showed him. "Heart," he said. "Yes."

It didn't look much like a heart to Martin. It looked like a handful of compacted mud.

Martin closed his eyes and drew air through his nose, testing the capacity of his lungs. He coughed and cleared his throat. When he felt ready, he sat up with an effort and swung his legs over the side of the table. The paper crinkled under his thighs – too loud, that paper. Having placed Martin's heart on a shiny tray next to the sink, Medhira had turned away to wash his hands. The heart looked like something rescued from the bottom of a river, something wrapped in weeds and encrusted with grime. It wept a thin black fluid.

"You took it out," Martin marveled.

"Yes, yes," Medhira said. "Heart very bad. Make very sick."

"May I see it?"

After drying his hands, Medhira offered the tray to Martin. Now that it was before him, Martin paused, wondering how it should be handled. He decided that it should be with caution, so used both hands. His heart was heavier than it looked, and firmer – like a mass of knotted jerky.

"It looks dead," Martin said.

Smiling, Medhira nodded. "Is dead."

"How long ago – I mean, when did it happen?"

"Very difficult to say. Heart is very strong,

ILLUSTRATED BY BEN BALDWIN

wants to live very much. Can take long time to die." He shrugged at Martin. "Can also happen very quick."

"I don't…that doesn't—"

"Here," Medhira said, taking the heart from Martin's cupped hands and passing him his shirt. "I can show to you. You can see."

After dressing, Martin allowed Medhira to walk him a few doors down the carpeted corridor, where he let them into a small storeroom filled with metal shelving. Martin stood just inside while the doctor pulled down a loose-flapped cardboard box and set it on a workbench. Withdrawing what looked like a chunk of basalt no larger than a plum, Medhira examined it briefly, then knocked it on the surface of the table to demonstrate its temper.

"Very old," Medhira said. Then passed it to Martin.

Not until he had it in his hands did Martin realize it was a heart. Pressed into its surface was a finishing nail; to that was tied a handwritten label with a name and date. Though the ink had faded, the date was still legible. Whatever had happened to this heart, had happened forty years ago. Medhira's next specimen was the size of a withered fist, the color of chewed tobacco. It had been dead fewer years than the first.

Medhira produced six more hearts in various stages of petrifaction, each a different shade of black or meaty brown. He offered each of them, in turn, to Martin.

The final heart was only three years removed. Its label read: *Carol Harrison*.

"Very young," Medhira said. "Very sad."

Martin wasn't sure if he meant the heart or Carol Harrison.

With his pen, Medhira lifted a deep fold of the heart to reveal a dark red coloring hiding beneath. "Color inside still. If you cut – if you open—" he mimed opening something like a fruit "—there is muscle still soft. Blood still inside maybe. Many hearts are made sick first inside. They are seeming healthy, but—" the doctor made a tight fist "—very solid. Very hard." He tapped Carol's heart and gave a regretful smile. "This dies first on the outside. You see? In fact, is not finished dying."

Until then, Martin had not noticed that the heart was unaccountably warm. "Not dead? Then why…?"

"Life," Medhira shrugged. "For some, is very hard. Remove heart, and pain is maybe not so bad, maybe less enough to be happy. You see?"

"Is she happy now? Carol?"

"Happy?" He shrugged. "Not so sad as before."

Fingering the leathery folds of Carol's heart, it suddenly occurred to Martin that there was something obscene in his handling of a strange woman's heart. Or if not obscene, at least intimate. Beth would disapprove. He returned the heart to the table, with the others, and cleared his throat. "What about mine? How…?"

Medhira spread his hands. "Unless we open…"

But Martin didn't want that.

So Medhira arranged the hearts by age on the tabletop. He tapped a spot towards the old end of the line. "You are here." He made a slight adjustment. "Maybe here? Fifteen years. Maybe seventeen. You see?"

Martin counted seventeen years back and found himself facing the memories of that final vacation on Jekyll Sound. He remembered how quiet it had been on the Atlantic with the motor cut, how painful the sunlight as he leaned over the gunwale to stare down the taut length of their anchorline, already regretting every decision that had brought them there. He could still hear Beth saying, "She's not coming up. Marty, why isn't she coming up?"

Martin steadied himself against the remembered swells. He didn't know how many years ago that had been, but seventeen sounded sickeningly correct.

"My daughter died," Martin said, surprising himself with the abruptness of the disclosure. He hadn't intended to share this with Medhira, but now that he had, felt obligated to say more. "We were scuba diving, and she drowned in the ocean. That happened seventeen years ago."

He didn't know how he expected Medhira to respond, so was neither disappointed, nor surprised, when the doctor said nothing at all.

Martin watched Medhira pack away his collection of hearts one by one. When the doctor held out his hand for Martin's heart, Martin found himself unwilling to give it up.

"Is not good for you to have now," Medhira

told him.

Martin stepped back. After all, it belonged to him.

Shrugging, Medhira folded up the box and returned it to the shelf. When all was in order, he held the door open for Martin and turned out the lights. As they stepped from the room, Medhira asked, "You have dog?"

"No."

"Good." He pointed his pen at Martin's heart. "Dogs like very much. Dogs will eat very fast."

At the front desk, Martin arranged a follow-up appointment with Medhira's receptionist, an attractive young woman dressed far too well for such a small room. *Kelli*, her nametag said. She had placed a chubby heart sticker over the 'i'. While Kelli tapped on her keyboard, Martin leaned in.

"Do you have a bag?" he asked. "Or a sack? Or something?" Keeping his body between the heart and the rest of the waiting room, he lifted it just enough to be seen over the counter. He felt as though he'd exposed himself.

"Oh!" Kelli said, then again in an entirely different tone. Rummaging behind the counter, she produced a paper fast food sack. Out of this she dumped a few packets of ketchup and a crumpled napkin, then displayed it for approval. "Okay?"

"Great," Martin said. "Yes, perfect. Thank you."

With painted fingernails, Kelli held the sack open at the corners while Martin inserted his whole hand to deposit the heart. Kelli folded down the opening and stapled it twice. She handed it back as though serving him a dish he'd ordered, but was certain he didn't really want, and wouldn't enjoy.

At the bus stop, Martin sat on the bench with the sack beside him. He'd only come to the doctor because he'd been feeling lethargic lately. Who would have thought they'd send him home with his heart in a burger sack?

What would he tell Beth?

Martin left his heart on the dresser when he came home. From the kitchen window, he watched Beth in the garden. She seemed happy out there, plying the soil with vigor in her wide-brimmed straw hat and paint-stained capris.

To test himself, Martin imagined her dead. A stroke perhaps, or an aneurism. Something sudden and fatal. He pictured her face down in the dirt, surrounded by all her tiny shovels and spilled seed packets. He paid attention to his feelings while imagining this, but didn't feel much. Not as much – he thought – as he should after forty years of marriage.

"You'd miss her," he told himself.

The empty spot in his chest shrugged.

Martin wandered to the living room and sat in his chair. "I love this chair," he said. "I've always loved this chair."

Certainly, it was a comfortable chair. Not what he would pick now though, if forced to choose. He found his remote in the side pouch and turned on ESPN. The Broncos were shoving the Packers up and down Lambeau Field: 21-3.

"I hate the Broncos," Martin said.

For a few minutes he watched the fiasco, meanwhile spying on his emotional reactions. A Broncos cornerback intercepted at the twenty and ran the length of the field, skipping over the Packers falling at his feet: 27-3.

Martin wasn't sure he cared.

He turned off the television and sat watching the ghost of himself in the black screen. The fact that he didn't care anymore wasn't what disturbed him. It was that he couldn't be sure he'd *ever* cared.

Martin was sitting on the bed in Michelle's room when Beth came in from outside. He heard the screen door slam behind her; he heard her rinsing things off in the kitchen sink. She passed by a little while later, did a double-take, and stopped to lean in.

"Hey," she said. "I didn't know you were home. How was the doctor?"

Not ready to answer that, Martin made a non-committal gesture.

Beth stepped in and folded her arms as though suddenly cold. She glanced at the shelving and the cobwebs in the corners. "It could use a dusting in here."

"I was just thinking about Michelle."

"Ah," Beth said. She sat next to him and let her gaze wander the bare walls. There was nothing left here of their daughter, really. Everything that had made it distinctly hers was long gone, leav-

ing it just a room in which a dead girl once lived.

"They took my heart out," Martin told her.

Beth turned to him, drawing back at the same time. "What?"

"The doctor. Medhira. He said it was already dead."

"What?" she said again.

"It's on my dresser…the heart. He said that it would just fester if left in. That it would make me sick."

Unable to shake the feeling that he'd done something atrocious and irresponsible, Martin looked down to avoid Beth's eyes. "He said that it looked like it had been dead for about seventeen years. That was his professional opinion: seventeen years."

He felt Beth calculating.

"Jekyll Sound," she said.

"I've been okay without it," Martin said. "Haven't I? I mean, I don't need it now, not after all this time." He gave her a direct look. "Do I?"

Beth had a hand over her mouth. Her eyes glistened.

"I feel okay," Martin said. "I feel fine."

It was her idea to bring out the old photos, which they'd packed away on the top shelf in Michelle's closet. Side-by-side on her bed, albums open across their thighs, they started at the beginning, the first recorded proofs of their life together. How young they were!

Martin felt they were explorers unearthing artifacts, turning their discoveries in the light to marvel at something they hadn't known they'd forgotten until brushing the dirt away. Younger versions of themselves marched across their laps, aging a year, two, three in the time it took to look from one plastic-coated sheet to the next. Appalled at the gaps, they turned back frequently to stem the flow.

"Oh!" Beth exclaimed at each fresh vision. She had a hundred ways of saying it.

The end, when it came, didn't surprise them. This was a life they'd already lived. Laid out behind glossy plastic sheets, it had no real surprises left.

There was Michelle: nineteen again. Relaxed in the eye of the camera, she leaned on the gunwale of their boat, Jekyll Sound a glittering plain of sunlight behind her. Her arms were long and tan; she had such a clever smile.

Then nothing – slick blank pages clear to the end.

Martin touched his daughter's face, the laminate cool under his fingers. Beside him, Beth had fallen silent. She held a crumpled tissue to her face, and had pulled her legs up under her.

"We don't take pictures anymore," she said.

"Do we even have a camera still?"

They faced one another, quite suddenly wondering, and Martin saw that his wife was – had been – crying. He didn't know what to do. She leaned into him, and put her arms around him as best she could while sitting by his side. He felt her weeping into his neck. Open to an empty page, the album had nothing left to say. It was powerless to rescue him from this. Martin's gaze drifted to the empty wall, and he gave her thigh an awkward pat. It had been a long morning, and he wondered what they should have for supper.

"What do you remember about me?" Martin asked Beth in bed. Their teeth were brushed; the lights – all but the bedside lamp – were off. In this place he felt safe. "Before Jekyll Sound, what was I like?"

Beth propped herself up to inspect him. "You always worked hard to take care of us," she said.

Martin waited. He turned his head on the pillow to look at her. "What else?"

"I'm thinking."

"It's not a hard question."

"You played guitar," she said.

"I worked hard. I played guitar. That's all? That's who I was?"

"You were so funny. You could always make us laugh. Especially Michelle."

"Not you, so much as Michelle," Martin said.

Beth smiled. "You knew a lot of jokes. You read joke books and told us the best of them – you don't remember this?"

Martin felt no connection to this stranger described by his wife.

"You liked the long ones best," she continued. "The ones like stories. You would tell the same joke a dozen times, but each time a little bit differently to see how closely she'd been paying attention. She loved that. She was very good at it, and so were you."

"Very good," Martin said, imitating Dr Medhira's lilt. "Very funny. I'm still funny."

Looking past him, Beth said, "Hm."

"Knock knock," Martin said.

Beth gave him a tired look.

"Knock knock," he insisted.

"Who's there?"

But Martin's mind seized up. He stared at his wife, mouth half-open, his mind – once good at this, or so Beth claimed – now blank.

"I thought I knew how it went," he said.

Beth touched his shoulder with a finger, as though making an important reminder. "We made love a lot. More than most couples, I think. You were creative."

Martin's mind was still caught on the stillborn joke, a deer in headlights. He stared searchingly at the ceiling, horrified by his failure to remember who had knocked at the door. He thought about a man who played guitar, who knew jokes that made children laugh. A man who loved his wife creatively.

"I'd like to be that person again," Martin said.

"It wasn't all good," Beth said. "We had our problems."

Martin remembered some of those problems, at least distantly. He watched a dim parade of unwelcome images cross the ceiling over their bed, as though cast there by a failing projector.

"If you could choose," Martin said, "would you take the man I was before, or the man I am now?"

"I love you," Beth said.

"That wasn't my question."

"Yes it was. Do you love me?"

"I would do anything you asked," Martin explained to her. "I would try to be anything you needed. If a man came in with a gun—"

"Be serious."

"I don't know how to *not* be serious. If a man came in with a gun, I would say, 'Shoot me instead.' Isn't that love? The important kind?"

"I think so," Beth agreed, but slowly. Then she lay back and smiled in fond remembrance. "But I do miss your jokes."

"Knock knock," Martin said. He was willing to try again, if she was. But Beth wouldn't answer. They both knew it was just ghosts at the door, and ghosts never know who they are.

She woke him in the middle of the night to ask him again, "Do you love me?"

Not the kind of love that one chooses dispassionately, she explained – not the kind to confront men with guns – but the other kind. The kind of ridiculous passion to fuel generations of suicidal poets. The kind of cauterizing love that splashed its victims with equal measures of madness, glee, and despair.

"How do I answer that, Beth?" Martin wanted to know. He felt helpless in the face of such questions.

She rolled away from him.

"That's unfair," Martin complained.

"It's not your fault."

"I don't have a heart anymore," he reminded her.

"I'm sorry I woke you."

Sitting once again on the irritable paper of Medhira's examination table, Martin submitted himself to the doctor's scrutiny. Medhira listened to Martin's lungs. He felt his lymph nodes and thumped his kidneys. He shined a light down Martin's throat.

"Good!" Medhira proclaimed. "Healthy."

"I feel different," Martin reported.

"This is okay," Medhira said. "This is nothing to make worry for."

"I'm not making worry," Martin said. "I'm just saying. I like different things. I eat different foods. I used to hate my neighbor – she's old and mean, and has too many cats. But on Wednesday I mowed her yard. She didn't even ask."

Medhira just smiled and nodded.

"You don't think something might be wrong?" Martin asked.

"Is nothing wrong," Medhira said. "With heart, things go wrong. Without—" He opened a hand as though to release an invisible bird. "What can be wrong with nothing?"

"Then yesterday I cried during the news. Do you remember that little boy who disappeared weeks ago? They found his shoes in a basement. I cried for an hour. That doesn't make sense to me."

"Is very sad," Medhira said.

"Yes, but doesn't it seem strange, me crying?"

"Is nothing strange," Medhira said. "To cry is the body's response to not one kind of pain only. Remember: mouth does not need heart to smile;

body does not need heart to love; eyes do not need heart to cry." The doctor paused to consider his own words, then concluded, "Is not very much for which heart is good."

"That would be upsetting to my wife," Martin said.

"Yes." Medhira nodded with an air of regret. "Heart can be very important to wife."

"What can I tell her?"

"Say to her, 'I am good.' Say, 'I am healthy.'"

Martin rubbed a hand over his face.

"All is good," Medhira assured him. "Emotion comes not only from heart. Heart is very loud, always making noise. Always complaining. While heart is shouting, all the rest of you is afraid to speak." With two fingers, he prodded Martin's gut. "Now heart is gone, and all the rest find their voice again. You will see."

"Okay," Martin said, too weary to argue.

"Do not be sad," Medhira said cheerily. "You are the lucky man. Many people spend whole of life obeying heart. This way and that they are dragged, everywhere. He is selfish, the heart. Very greedy. Always wanting the things he cannot have. Always offended, always unhappy. Cannot be trusted. Is better not to have. You see?"

"Do you still have yours?" Martin asked.

Medhira grinned widely as he led Martin to the door. "What kind of doctor will not have his own medicine, hm?"

Martin detoured on the way home to buy a used acoustic guitar and a pack of new strings. He went through the side-yard gate and sat on the patio in the shade. He hadn't been out there long before his tuning efforts attracted Beth from the kitchen.

"Oh my," she said.

"Do you like it?"

"I haven't heard you play for years."

Martin plucked a string, turned a peg, plucked again. "I'm not as good as I was."

Beth sat with her hands between her knees and watched him struggle awkwardly through a series of chords.

"What did the doctor say?" she asked.

Martin picked another string and bent close to listen. "He said I'm good. I'm healthy."

"That's all?"

"On the way home, I thought that I might like to do some of the things I did before," Martin said. "I thought this would be a good start. Don't you?"

Beth smiled. "Do you remember *Adelita*? You played that one a lot."

Martin didn't, so Beth hummed a few bars, which sounded not at all familiar to him. He abandoned the effort and went back to his tuning efforts. He remembered being much better. All that evening he spent on the patio with the guitar. Beth brought him a sandwich and a beer, which he accepted gratefully. He worked at it until the progressions came naturally again, but hard as he tried, could convince none of it to sound like music.

Martin stayed outside until the house was dark. Long since gone to bed, Beth had left a light on in the kitchen for him. At the bedroom door, he listened to her breathing before going in to retrieve the sack from his dresser. He took it to the kitchen, where he pulled the staples and upturned it onto a wooden cutting board. His blackened heart fell out like a fist of compressed bacon. Looking at it, he thought of the woman who'd had hers removed to make her hardships more endurable. He thought of its warmth, how he'd felt the life hibernating inside it. He covered his own heart with a hand, hoping to feel something. It remained cold.

Martin selected a carving knife from the drawer and held his heart against the cutting board as though it were a tomato. Wasn't it possible, he thought, that the leathery exterior protected something still living?

His first cut was shallow. He pried apart the lips of the incision, hoping to reveal a hint of red. His next cut was bolder, and a wedge of heart fell away. Catching the sharp smell of brine, Martin dropped the blade and steadied himself with both hands on the counter. He felt, he was sure of it, gentle swells moving beneath him. He covered the open heart with a hand, hoping the cry of gulls wouldn't wake Beth.

"Mr Simmons?" Kelli the receptionist said into the waiting room. It was late; Martin had the room to himself. Returning the unread

magazine to its stack, he rose.

"Come on back," Kelli said, bright smiles and perfume.

He sat once more on the paper-covered table in the examination room, waiting until Medhira entered, leading with his delighted smile.

"Martin," the doctor said. "Everything is good?"

"Everything's good," Martin confirmed, drawing a thermos flask from the pocket of his sport-coat. After unscrewing the top, he carefully tugged out a white handkerchief, the bottom creases of which were spotted with blood. He tilted the thermos so Medhira could squint into it.

"I'd like for you to put it back," Martin said.

Medhira looked skeptical. "Is very small," he said.

"It's not much," Martin agreed. "But it's something. It's a start."

With both hands, Medhira took the thermos. He shook it just a little, as though to wake something up. He sniffed the contents. "Is not so good," he frowned. "Is very small."

"But there's a chance," Martin said. "If we put it back it could grow? It could get bigger?"

Medhira looked doubtful. "Chances not so good," he said. "Chances maybe very bad."

"I'd like to try."

"Possible to make you very sick," Medhira warned him.

"I cut away the dead parts," Martin said. He was already removing his jacket.

With the expression of a man who had done all he could to talk sense into a friend determined to act foolishly, the doctor tipped the thermos over his open hand. He had to give it a few shakes before a tiny scrap of meat, sticky and red, plopped into his palm.

Stripped of his shirt, Martin reclined on the crackling paper.

Medhira paused over him, searching, it seemed, for some parting advice.

"It's going to hurt," Martin guessed.

Medhira smiled thankfully. "Very much," he said. "More is the pain putting back than taking out. You see?"

"I do see," Martin said.

It was far more painful than Martin had anticipated, and he cried out more than once with the doctor's hand moving inside him. When it was done, he was left folded up and weeping on the paper while Medhira turned away to scrub his empty hands at the sink.

Martin walked the three blocks between the bus stop and home. Walking hurt, but so did standing up straight and breathing. He told himself this was good pain. His senses were raw. Birdsong startled him; the brightness of everything hurt his eyes.

Reaching the edge of his driveway, he stopped to make an inward assessment and found himself unsure how to proceed. What would be expected of him? How should he act? There would be a lot of that kind of uncertainty for a while, he suspected. Success would require a good deal of regard for the vulnerable little scrap inside him. He would have to tread lightly and listen carefully. At first, he would have to stay out of Michelle's room. And then – only when he felt ready, and not all at once – he would have to let her go.

Martin approached his front door, keys in hand, but Beth opened the door from within before he could turn the key. She seemed surprised to find him there, bent half forward.

"I love you," Martin told her, before she had time to say anything. That also seemed to give her surprise. Straightening, Martin took her hand in his and guided it under his shirt, pressing open palm to bare chest. For a long moment he held it there, watching her face intently for some sign that she felt what he felt. Deep in concentration, head tilted and eyes narrowed, Beth seemed lost in her effort to hear a distant something. Not a strong or solid beat – nothing steady, or even promising. But something. To Martin, it felt like maybe the stirring of miniscule wings in his chest. It felt like maybe something was turning, or waking. He dared to imagine it felt like something opening.

"You feel it?" he asked.

"Oh," she breathed. Then, eyes widening, "*Oh.*"

It wasn't the passion he'd hoped for, but it was a start.

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ILLUSTRATED BY RICHARD WAGNER

Esta, it's extremely important that David and his razorblade join us, Mrs Henry tells me. *Don't fret, child. He'll barely notice the blood.*

FLORIDA MIRACLES

BY JULIE C. DAY

"Three days," I say. I grab a slice of pizza from the box on the coffee table, then glance at David and his blood-spattered paper towel. It's gotten to the point that David barely winces when he draws the blade across his skin.

Tonight's distraction, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower,* mutters in the background. The movie is all suicide and drugs. Considering David's dad, David's cutting, and, worst of all, his mom – well, sometimes being human means being stupid – like right exactly now.

"Three nights?" David squints at me, confused. If I hadn't already guessed from the slowly expanding lines across his flesh, tonight is clearly one of his rough nights. David and I, along with Mrs Henry, have been tracking the days until our trip for months now, performing our own private countdown.

"Three days," I say as I carefully roll the slice of pizza, trapping the melted cheese inside, "until our camping trip."

"Oh, right." David sets his double-edged blade on the coffee table next to the paper towels, the pizza box, and my sketchbook. "What do you think?" He holds out his arm, showing off the four equidistant cuts.

"You know what I fucking think." No matter what I try – threats, sympathy, even one interminable week of silence – nothing seems to help. At least he won't bleed to death with me around. That's the hope anyway.

Guilt, Esta, Mrs Henry says from somewhere deep inside, *is a wasted emotion.*

Mrs Henry has spent the last fifteen years nestled inside my brain. One of Florida's many hidden Maskers, at least that's what she tells me. Mrs Henry, she tells me, is almost eight thousand years old. Despite her age and all that "flesh time", sometimes that old lady knows absolutely nothing.

Titusville used to be called Miracle City, USA. Our engineers built the space shuttle, the Apollo rockets, the Gemini series. But not anymore. These days, our town is flooded with unemployed aerospace engineers. I don't blame our moms for trying to escape. It's just that my mom used a corporate transfer to Maryland, while David's used a knife.

"Pretend this never happened," she said that last night as I stood in their kitchen. "Promise."

I wish I could.

Guilt and love. They put me in David's car each morning on the way to school, make me tell him another lame-ass anti-joke. They hold me against the couch as David bleeds, razor blades and pizza boxes stacked around us.

Cocooned deep inside my head, how could Mrs Henry ever understand the necessity of letting the mess leak out? The human need for tears – or blood?

When I was little I thought the world must be full of Mrs Henrys: a second voice safely encased inside each special child, watching everything through their bright young eyes.

Back then, David didn't care that he couldn't see or hear or even touch Mrs Henry. After all, Mrs Henry was funny. And I was more than happy to repeat everything she said.

"When I'm bigger," David said, "When I'm bigger, I'll drive a car all the way to Alaska so I can see the polar bears and the igloos. Esta will come too because she's my friend."

"I was bigger once, little David Tissandier," Mrs Henry replied in her Mrs Henry way, and already David was cracking up. "No. Really. Much bigger. With two extra rows of teeth, just like a dragon."

"Fat whopper, Mrs Henry. Fat whopper. Everyone knows dragons have one row of teeth. It's sharks that are all jumbled." But David was laughing. And Mrs Henry was laughing, too, the sound like a deep hum or a rumbling purr.

Of course, I was the only one who could hear her.

I used to call Mrs Henry a monster, a dragon, an alien visitor from outer space. Perhaps she's

all of those things. Perhaps none. Masker seems closer to a calling than a species. Whoever or whatever she used to be, Mrs Henry has rested inside my mind for my entire life, talking, always talking, over whatever I have to say.

Most nights, after the pizza, the movie, and the blanket thrown over David's passed-out dad, David drives me home while I stare at the lit-up houses and wonder. How many sad rocket-kids are sitting inside their air-conditioned homes right this very moment? How many are stuck waiting for their secret transformation?

It feels like we must be legion.

Just two days left.

Masker transformations can be…messy. You may have to guide David's hand. Be prepared. I wouldn't want to lose either of you.

"It'll be fine," I say. "Go back to sleep."

So you can ignore me? Mrs Henry sounds almost imperious. I'm no longer a little kid. She doesn't have to be quite so nice.

It's my *god-damn mind.* I pull the pillow over my head. I'm tired.

Really? Is that what you tell yourself?

"Why did you even choose me?" I'm so irritated I actually speak the words out loud.

Maskers worship people, Mrs Henry whispers, as though the words prove her love.

Mrs Henry. More and more, she feels like the parasite nestled in the center of my brain: a helminth, a protozoan, a horsehair worm just waiting to burst out.

Fifteen isn't what it used to be, Mrs Henry says.

Whatever.

Only two days left until the old dragon flies away and finds a new fleshy home. Only two days until I enact my own transformation. And David's.

At some point after Mrs Henry announced her departure, she made me an offer I accepted. David may not know it yet, but the two of us are following her, burying ourselves inside someone else's neurochemical enclosure. After fifteen years with Mrs Henry, I know exactly what to do. Imagine living life ensconced inside the safety of a Masker cocoon. It has to be better than this.

You'll try anything if you're desperate enough. Survive it too. The camping trip is more than Mrs Henry's goodbye. "Camping trip" is my code for getting the hell out of here.

The final day.

On this trip, my sketchbook is staying put along with all those unwanted memories: the dim moonlight, the shadows that moved across Mrs Tissandier's face, the knife she pulled from the kitchen drawer, how my fingers itched to hide behind my sketchbook as David's mom started to cry.

I carry a Moleskine everywhere: school, Sand Point Park, David's house. It's one of those books with the special elastic closures. Sometimes I draw David with that straight-edged scar bisecting his left brow, or my dad, or even the bright arch of rocket fire from yet another nighttime launch. Mostly, though, I draw my other self – old Mrs Henry – hidden away inside.

Mrs Henry tells me she has long straight hair, pure white. And that the skin is dark and ashy from lack of sunlight. My Mrs Henry teeth are even. My eyes laser sharp. It's like those formal portraits hanging in the Orlando Museum of Fine Art: any scars erased.

Our last night, and still Mrs Henry can't stop talking.

Esta, Mrs Henry says, *did I ever tell you about my fingers? Beautiful tapered things. Nails like shimmering pearls. You should draw them. Wouldn't that be nice?*

"No." I ignore Mrs Henry and focus on my bedroom mirror. I bend my head to the paper, move my charcoal pencil across the page. The picture has to be just right. Dark hair, wavy. A frown line between my eyebrows. A dimple at the corner of my left cheek. I'm determined; the me I've been for fifteen years will be tacked to my

bedroom door when I finally walk out, watching over Dad even after I'm gone.

There are no more days left to count.

Mrs Henry and I pause outside Dad's study door.

Florida is in the full flower of spring. 5 p.m. and the sun hasn't even started to set. Inside my house, though, the blinds in Dad's room are all the way down.

Hour after hour, Dad sits in front of his flickering computer screens. He claims the sunlight interferes with his work, though all I can see when I glance over his shoulder is the usual mess. A half-finished game of *Halo 2* takes up one screen, stock quotes and a steady stream of news blogs another. When Dad isn't vanquishing imaginary people, he likes to comment. Late into the night StarmanXtreme burns up the message boards.

"Dad? I'm heading out."

"Right. Okay."

"Camping with David," I clarify.

"Good."

I can see Dad's face reflected in the monitors. No matter which version I look at, his expression doesn't change: starman lost, starman lonely. That's my dad, all right. I lay my hand on his chair. There's a fold on the back of his neck, a deep crease like a heavy frown. Most days that's all he shows me: that fold of flesh and the graying stubble that runs just below his hairline.

"Bye, Dad." I try to put real meaning into those two words; after all this is our final father-daughter goodbye.

"Bye," he replies and turns his head in my direction, surprising us both.

I'd hug him with my two fleshy arms, but I know that would only make him uncomfortable – me, too. We've never been a touching family.

He wasn't a bad parent, Mrs Henry murmurs. Her own way of saying goodbye, I guess. And why not. She may not be human, but she's known him my entire life.

It's dusk. David and I crouch in the scrub next to Crawler Way, the road that used to carry the space shuttles from the Vehicle Assembly Building to Launch Pad 39B. NASA may be what this area is known for, but the Maskers' secret expeditions into our world started long before the missile ranges, the aerospace engineers, and NASA's Mercury program arrived.

David and I are both wearing our flame-resistant coveralls, long waders, and the class-four-rated insulating rubber gloves I ordered online. I should be more excited. I've waited fifteen years to really see Mrs Henry. Fifteen years with only thought-words and pencil sketches. It's important to keep all traces hidden and not spook the flesh. That's what Mrs Henry tells me. After eight thousand years of life, I guess she should know.

The land around the launch site is a mix of marsh grasses, empty paved roads, and drainage ditches. The NASA control center stands a quarter mile away. From our lookout it's easy to see the center's main parking lot and its dwindling collection of cars. David and I can't start anything until the last of the workers have left for the day.

"David."

"Yeah."

"You've always been a good friend – even when you were a baby."

David looks at me askance. "What's that supposed to mean? We're the same fucking age."

"Right." Despite my request for razorblades, I'm sure David's more than half convinced this is just another one of my schemes. Like the time we went gator hunting in Moore Creek, or the time we built a transmitter to communicate with the dolphins that swim near the causeway: all half-assed kid-dreams with very little in the way of results.

"Getting a little old for this, don't you think?" David says into the silence.

"Worried you won't get to use that blade?"

For a moment David actually looks pissed.

"I'm here to help you, yeah? The razor was your fucking idea."

Some secrets are best kept inside, that's what Mrs Henry has always told me. A ritual cleansing, I called it. Freeing Mrs Henry, I said. But tonight, David's blade is going to do much more than set one Masker free. It's going to take all three of us to a whole new life.

One glance at our dads and you can see the truth: young bodies might be adept at adjusting and reapplying masks, but eventually everything gets old. Graying, slumped over a computer screen, their fleshy envelope doesn't even fit. And still guys like my dad aren't able to slide it off.

I think that's what David's mom was doing with the knife: trying to escape. She was just too old to get it right. Her hair was black when she died, not the tiniest bit of gray. Of course it was easy for her to miscalculate her available window of time.

I cried that night as I stood in David's kitchen; just me, Mrs Henry, and David's mom. I cried as I repeated Mrs Henry's words. "Shh. It's so late. Just let them sleep. Shh. It'll be all right." And those final Mrs Henry words as David's mom lifted the knife, "Don't worry. David will always have me."

I hated Mrs Henry and her promises. And all the blood, I hated that as well.

I miss David's mom. I miss old David and his crazy-happy smile even more. The way he opened his eyes extra-wide as he tilted his head to one side. Sometimes it feels like those pieces of David are lost forever. Mrs Henry, she worries about things like that, missing pieces that "break the integrity of the whole". Me, I just worry about being left behind, the Florida heat and the birds a constant reminder of everyone who has flown away.

"David?"

"Huh?"

"Why does Mr Emmanuel wear coveralls?"

When David turns his head toward me, his eyes have a knowing glint. "Okay, I give. Why?"

"Because it makes practical sense for an electrical worker to minimize the possibility of injury due to a high-energy arc-flash event."

"That has got to be your worst anti-joke ever," David says, but I swear to God, he almost looks like he's smiling.

And then the smile fades as he scans the drainage ditch and surrounding brush.

"Mrs Henry is the worst kind of friend," David mutters. "Gators all over this place."

Don't worry, David. Alligators are actually quite timid around people, Mrs Henry says. Despite my own worries, I feel compelled to translate.

7 p.m. and the parking lot is finally empty. I can feel the heat building inside my chest.

"So how much longer are we gonna wait?" David looks tired.

Soon, Mrs Henry says.

"Soon," I repeat, unzipping the top of my coverall and scratching at my skin.

It's about to get a lot hotter than this, Mrs Henry says.

"I have no idea how old I really am," I whisper. I can feel the racing of something fiery and sharp inside my flesh.

"What the hell are you talking about?" David snorts. He remembers me coming over to his house for first-grade sleepovers. We used to take baths together – all that unlined scrubbed-clean skin. No way am I some old lady playing with a puppet life. I'm sure that's what he's thinking.

But it's getting harder and harder to untangle myself from Mrs Henry. It's not just my skin. I can feel a blaze deep in my gut. I can feel a weight bashing against my skull.

I've always listened to Mrs Henry. Mrs Henry worshipping my bits of bone and flesh. Mrs Henry reveling in my many moods. Mrs Henry promising me, always promising me something more. Today, David and I are finally going to

find our just-right home. That's the deal.

Just a little cut, she said. Another Mrs Henry lie. My head feels like it should be nothing but blood and shards of bone. "My whole life, it's all been one long game of dress-up," I say with sudden anger. "No wonder you liked me better when I was little."

Esta, that's not—

"You loved it when I made a rocket pack out of soda bottles and painted Dragon on the straps," I say, barreling over her words. "You loved it when I never once asked you why." I pause, surprised by the tears in my eyes. "People aren't supposed to listen in to everything."

I'm not people.

"You always knew you'd leave one day. That sounds like people to me."

Launch and separation.

Lightning pushes up through my ribcage, working to burn its way free.

It's time.

"David, you're going to have to cut deep, really push down."

"What? No! That's not what I signed up for. A ritual you said. A kid thing."

"David, I need you to trust me." Overlaying my own pain-roughened voice, I can hear Mrs Henry's repeated cry: *new flesh, new flesh.* Her words feel like choking smoke and rocket flame.

"David," I say as I step toward my friend. "Please." I keep my hands at my sides. My chest roars with flame. "Let's fly away. The two of us and Mrs Henry. Just like before."

"Are you sure—"

"Do it!"

David pulls his razorblade from his coveralls. His face is scrunched in some ugly mixture of concentration and fear. He raises his arm, and then with a quick left-to-right motion, he drives the blade along the exposed flesh at the top of my coveralls.

For one gasping moment, the cut stings, nothing more, and then I'm ablaze, shaking with the power of that old worm as she pushes her way out.

Finally, Mrs Henry roars.

I can feel my throat closing against the searing air trapped inside my lungs. If she doesn't find the opening soon, Mrs Henry will incinerate me from the inside out.

"Esta. Jesus," David cries. He takes a step back. Stops. "This helps us fly like Mrs Henry?"

"She promised me – your mom – she—"

"My mom? Esta, what about my mom?!"

I close my eyes. This is all wrong: Mrs Henry, the pain, my own self. *Focus, Esta.* A sharp stabbing pain beats against my rib cage. *Let me out!* Drives itself against my breastbone and spine. And I'm sobbing, snot and tears falling across my face.

"Esta? I—" David starts, then says nothing more.

I open my eyes, meet David's stare, screaming, screaming, as the skin over my chest splits wide. I can feel Mrs Henry filling my throat, pressing down against my lungs, and then finally she tumbles out. The part of me David only half-believed in is leaving.

"Fuck," David says and nothing more.

"A new life," Mrs Henry hisses, exultant. Out here in the real world Mrs Henry's skin is puke-green. She has a snout and wide heavy jaws. Her claws are long and thick and flaking. There's no lovely white hair. Instead there are scales – and teeth. So many teeth. Mrs Henry isn't beautiful. She's terrifying.

She writhes in the drainage ditch, letting my blood wash away, while David watches, still silent. The bloody razor hangs from his right hand.

It's not just David's razorblade. Blood runs down my own neck and chest. There's a weird gap above my heart. But I exist. I'm here, breathing, despite the fiery dragon.

I'm also still human. Masker free. "Mrs Henry?" I have to speak actual words to talk to her. The silence inside my head is like a miracle.

"What now?"

But Mrs Henry says nothing. Instead, she rises up from the ditch, sways. "Hurry, David. Let's fly." She opens her mouth wide and shows her dragon teeth, all three rows. "Too slow."

"I don't get—" David replies. "My mom. Just explain."

"Finish or don't, little David Tissandier. It's time." Mrs Henry stares at him, then snaps her teeth together with seeming irritation. I stare, too, her meaning suddenly clear. Sometime in the last few minutes David made one small cut along the flesh of his left wrist and lower arm. Sometime in the last few minutes he stopped.

"But I still don't—" David isn't lifting the blade, but he isn't letting go of it either.

"Child, she doesn't matter. Neither of them ever did." Mrs Henry unfurls her leathery wings and staggers toward the stand of marsh grasses on the other side of the road. "So weak, David Tissandier. Just like sad little Esta."

"Esta?" David is looking at me as he speaks, not her.

This David isn't close to the kid he was when we were five. He isn't even the same as he was last summer before his mom died. But he's my living David.

"Esta?" He watches me, seemingly willing to wait as long as it takes. "Is this really what you want?" He waves the razorblade in my direction.

"Your mom. She asked me not to tell." I actually say the words out loud.

There's a screech and a leathery flap of wings as Mrs Henry rises up from the marsh and starts her flight, escaping from the launch site, the blood, and us.

Escaping. Shedding our human skins. I can't imagine anything less appealing. "David. No." God, I missed so many things. Despite her fifteen, or fifty, or eight thousand years, Mrs Henry is no miracle. This entire time, it's our lives, David's and mine, that have been miraculous.

I grab David's hand, take the blade, toss it into the nearby scrub. I can still see Mrs Henry heading east. Her wings move in clumsy arcs. Her body is low to the ground. She looks like she's hiding from the sky.

"Esta." David pauses, sweat streaming down his face. "I don't want to be all alone." His words are like an echo of my entire childhood, so afraid to let Mrs Henry and her Masker promises go.

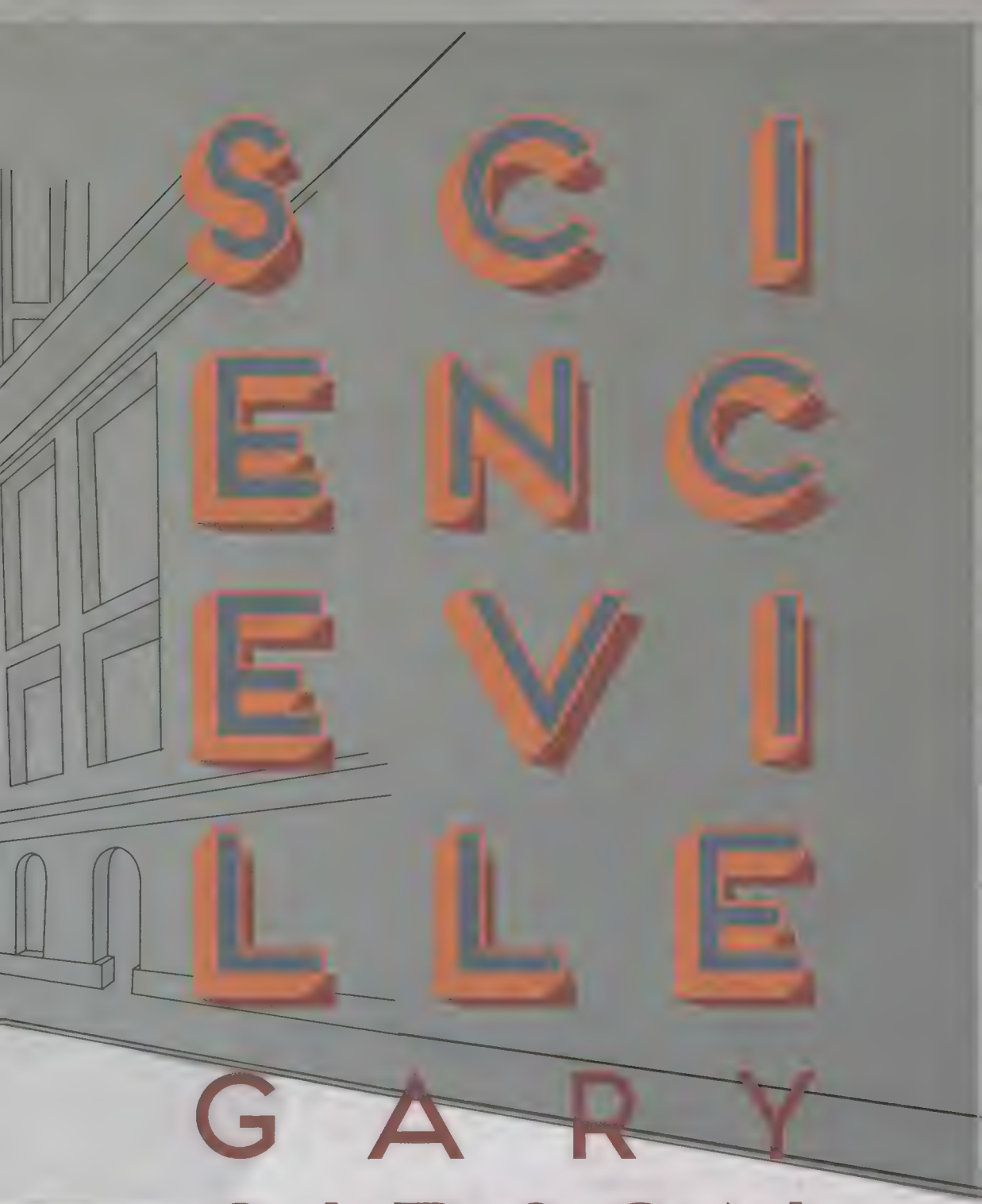
There are things I could say, like how sad his mom was to leave him, like how she didn't mean to hurt either of us, like how I've got his hand in mine and I'm never letting go. "I'm here," I say instead. I squeeze his hand, firm and so very fleshy.

Mrs Henry was right; it was a miracle, a burning painful miracle that David and I needed all along.

Maskers may be an ancient tribe, but they are not my people. They have no real children. No friends. They can't feel pain like us true Florida dragons.

Real Florida dragons scar when you cut them. We bleed. Sometimes we even break. But it is the one true miracle that I almost didn't figure out: real Florida dragons don't remain entombed and protected forever-more. They don't run. True Florida dragons try to take to the sky. True Florida dragons want to soar.

Julie C. Day's fiction has appeared or is upcoming in such magazines as *Podcastle*, *Farrago's Wainscot*, *Electric Velocipede*, and *A cappella Zoo's* best-of. This is her third story for *Interzone*. Born in Darlington, she has hazy memories of catching bees with jam-sweetened water, battery-powered fans from an indoor market, and a matching set of red vinyl armchairs where she hid from both the monsters and the television screen. Julie now lives in western Massachusetts. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from USM's Stonecoast program and a M.S. in Microbiology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Some of her favourite things include gummy candies, loose teas, standing desks, and possibilities that new friends bring. You can find Julie on Twitter @thisjulieday or through her website: www.stillwingingit.com.



GARY GIBSON

ILLUSTRATED BY VINCE HAIG

"Congratulations," said Chase, when Joel showed him the letter. "Looks like you've got your first stalker."

"Let me see." Phil yanked the letter out of Chase's hand. "And she says she lives in Scienceville?" He darted a look at Joel. "Oh man. Even *I* don't get ones that crazy."

"Asshole." Joel snatched the letter back. "She doesn't say she lives there."

A look passed between the two other men. "No, just that she used to," said Chase.

"Which isn't at all weird," said Phil, "what with Scienceville not actually existing and all."

Over on the far side of the teachers' lounge Janice Glynn, who taught art, gave them a leery eye from above a chipped mug reading *World's Best Cat Mom*.

Joel's face reddened.

"Ignore Miss Havisham," said Phil, dropping his voice. "Please tell me you're not actually going to write back to her."

Joel forced a laugh. "Not a chance. She's obviously crazy. Anyone who'd write a letter like that has to be."

"Assuming it's really a she," said Chase.

Phil snapped his fingers. "Might be a he. A truck driver. Some sweaty forty-stone guy who lives in a basement." He rubbed his chin as if in thought. "Who else do we know spends most of his time in a basement?"

"Hey, screw you," said Joel. "I didn't need to show either of you the damn letter."

Phil put his hands up. "Okay. No offence intended. Maybe this isn't the best place to talk about it," he added, glancing towards Janice.

"You'd better just hope she never hears what you call her," muttered Chase.

The end of recess came, and Joel spent the rest of that afternoon teaching. He wondered if he should have told Phil and Chase about the photograph that came with the letter, or that it wasn't even the first such letter he'd received.

A month before, a film crew from KSTV had interviewed Joel and some of the other artists taking part in the Fountain Grove Gallery's annual "outsider art" exhibition. They'd given Joel just enough space for a couple of boroughs, and nothing more. He'd stood before a blown-up poster of one of Scienceville's main districts while a reporter with carefully blow-dried hair asked why he'd spent a significant fraction of his adult life designing enormous, intricately detailed maps of a place that didn't exist.

Scienceville, Joel explained to the increasingly bemused reporter, was a utopian community he'd dreamed up as a kid. It was a place where advanced scientific research for the genuine betterment of mankind could be carried out free of interference. Then he spent the rest of the evening watching people hurry by his exhibit on their way to see Gwen Frith's fine-art renditions of scenes from hardcore porn films with monkeys replacing the actors.

The next morning, he caught his interview on KSTV's morning show. He'd been cut down to a ten-second sound bite that made him look deranged.

The first letter arrived shortly afterward, care of the gallery, all the way from France. It had been written on a manual typewriter by some guy called Fredrick Milan who insisted not only that Scienceville was real, but that he'd been dreaming about it and painting pictures of it since he was young. He was old, which went some way to explaining the avoidance of email.

Joel googled Milan and found pictures of an old, crumpled-looking man with a crooked nose and eyes that gleamed from beneath a shiny bald head. More, he was a real artist – and a renowned one, at that.

Joel kept browsing until he found some of Milan's work, but there was nothing even vaguely reminiscent of Scienceville. Most of Milan's paintings consisted of swirling abstracts, or near-blank canvases with tiny smears in one corner – all of which sold for a lot of money.

Milan wanted Joel to get in touch at the soonest opportunity, but Joel just shoved the letter inside one of many folders of sketches shelved in the basement where he worked on Scienceville. More than likely, the old man's mental faculties were declining with age.

By contrast, the second letter – also sent care of the gallery – made him wonder if he was the one losing his grip on reality.

I read about you online, the letter read. *I grew*

up in Scienceville, and even though it was a very long time ago and I was very small, I do remember that Newton Avenue isn't parallel to Atomic Road. Instead, they cross over each other – and the Halls of Justice are east of Bohr Parks, not west.

It was from a woman called Natalie Donaldson, in Scotland. She explained she'd asked the gallery for his email, but they refused. Clearly, the gallery owners had no similar qualms about forwarding snail-mail.

There were more details than just that. At first, when he saw she'd accurately named places on the map, Joel got a shiver down his spine. But then he remembered the gallery had scanned portions of Scienceville and put them online, most particularly the section where Newton Avenue and Atomic Road were shown running north and south through Bohr Parks. She must, he realised, have gotten the details from there.

She, too, wanted him to write back, although she was vague as to why. It occurred to Joel the letter might actually be from Milan, or from someone else entirely, pretending to be both people. It simply wasn't possible that two strangers could independently write to him acting like a place he'd invented as a kid was real. So when he got home Thursday evening, he shoved Natalie Donaldson's letter into the same place he'd put Milan's, so he didn't have to think any more about either of them.

That evening, like every other since Dale and his mother passed, stretched out like a long and empty highway. He ate and watched TV, then made his way down to the basement, switching on the overhead lights before stepping up close to the outer edge of Waverley Borough, one of the newer outlying districts.

Over the last five years Scienceville had spread, sheet by sheet and district by district, until it covered very nearly the entire basement floor, except for a narrow margin around the edges. Detailed drawings and sketches of its principal architecture were pinned on the walls all around. The city was a smorgasbord of influences drawn from Buckminster Fuller, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Ebenezer Howard, Fritz Lang's Metropolis, and Korda's vision of Everytown. Dozens and dozens of sheets of paper of varying sizes were carefully arranged according to a key system scrawled on the back of each, indicating how that sheet linked to each of its neighbours.

The whole thing was laid on a series of rubber mats that were a lot easier on the knees than the basement's concrete floor. A small plastic crate sat next to the boiler where he kept pencils, erasers, tape, crayons and paints. For some reason he'd never been able to envision what lay beyond Scienceville's borders: it was as if the town was its own self-contained universe, part of yet separate from the wider world.

One wall of the basement was almost entirely hidden behind a row of tall Ikea bookshelves he'd scored off Craigslist, their shelves crammed with file boxes where he kept the rest of the city: Scienceville was now much too big to fit on the floor in its entirety, so much of it was stored according to a catalogue system he'd invented. There were also a number of books on city planning and architecture, some well-thumbed and some hardly touched, and nearly a dozen volumes of history. Yet more boxes contained detailed histories of Scienceville's origins, and major events that had occurred since its founding.

Waverley was shaping up to be a new district on the absolute periphery of Scienceville. Most of the high street was still missing; Joel didn't need to refer to any of his files to know that following the Nuclear Treaty of 1962, negotiated and signed in Scienceville's Halls of Justice, there had been an influx of East Germans and Russians once nuclear weapons facilities on both sides of the Iron Curtain began to shut down. Most of the new immigrants, Joel had decided, would have wound up in Waverley, and would almost certainly have arrived with pretty specific requirements when it came to their culinary habits. Waverley's high street shops would need to sell both Russian and German food, and books and newspapers in both languages as well.

Joel sat by the desk, opened his MacBook and spent the next hour browsing for books on German and Russian immigration, until he found what he needed and clicked *Buy*.

"So," said Chase on Friday morning, "my cousin's back in town. Sherylyn? Who just got divorced?"

Phil let out a soft groan from across the teachers' lounge, his laptop balanced on his knees. Chase glared at him, but Phil just grinned around the bagel half-wedged into his mouth.

"You met Sherylyn, right?" asked Chase, turning back to Joel.

"Didn't she get married just last year…?"

Chase made a face. "Didn't last long. Just moved back here for a job. Maybe you could… take her out and show her around?"

Phil grunted around his bagel. "You don't want her, *I'll* take her."

"Shut up, Phil. You're a pig." Chase looked hard at Joel. "You'd be doing me a favour. Otherwise she's going to sit around all evening at home with Marge bitching about her ex and I'll have to listen."

"I'd love to," said Joel. Chase's face brightened. "But maybe some other time."

"Don't be so pushy," said Phil, putting his laptop back in his duffel bag and moving towards the door. "But if he's not available, I am."

"*You* have a reputation," said Chase. "And not a good one. Joel…"

Joel stood. "I'll think about it."

"You mean no," said Chase. "You always mean no."

"I'll see you Saturday."

"How long's it been, Joel? Getting on what, four years?"

"Five," said Joel, stepping towards the door Phil was holding open. "Let Phil take her. He knows more places."

Phil nodded vigorously. "I know all the best restaurants."

"You know," Chase said to Phil, "there's a reason Marge made me promise not to tell you she was back in town. Joel, I—"

Joel just shook his head, laughing, and let the door swing shut behind him.

"Saturday at six!" Chase yelled through the closed door. "Barnaby's before the game!"

The next day, Joel arrived at Barnaby's to find Sherylyn sitting alone in a booth.

She darted a look at him. "You're not—" She closed her eyes. "Ah, Jesus."

Joel looked down at her, then at the other, mostly empty booths reaching into the dim interior of the bar. He couldn't see Chase, or anybody else he knew.

"Sherylyn," he said, sitting across from her. "I guess we've been set up."

She peered at him. "Did you know…?"

"Not a clue." She fixed him with a look and he raised his hands. "Hands up. It's the truth."

She pushed at a paper napkin, then sat back, shaking her head. "Marge…I'm gonna kill that fucking girl. I told her not to…" She glanced at him through a tuft of hair. "Look, it's not that you're not—"

"It's fine." Joel shrugged. "We could call it a night and engage in some angry texting, or…"

She looked at the door, then at Joel, then towards the bar, tapping long fingernails on the table top.

"What the hell," she said at last. "You couldn't possibly be worse than the last guy she set me up with."

"How did that go?"

"We got married. You going to buy me a drink or not?"

They talked small stuff for the next couple hours, how little San Jose had changed since they'd both graduated, Sherylyn a few years after Joel. She'd gone to work in the New York Museum Archives before getting married and nearly as quickly divorced.

She gradually moved around the booth until they were sitting side by side and touched his arm a couple of times. She'd known Dale, but only from a distance, Dale having graduated when Sherylyn was still finishing high school.

"Marge mentioned you were known as an artist these days."

He took a sip of his Moosehead. "You really want to know?"

She nodded, and he told her about Scienceville, and how it brought focus back into his life after Dale died. To his surprise, she didn't get the judgemental look people sometimes did.

In fact, it wasn't long before she asked if she could see it.

She kneeled on the floor by his side, peering down at the streets and alleys and buildings laid out across the basement floor, then up at

the sketches Joel had pinned to the walls to help him construct the map in all its myriad, swirling colours.

"This is amazing, Joel," she said. "I had no idea it was so…detailed. And you really just made all of this up?"

"I… Sure." He nodded.

She laughed, her shoulder brushing his. By the time they'd found a taxi, they were both so drunk they were having to hold each other upright. "You don't sound sure."

"After all this time, it feels real to me."

"What about the rest of the world?" she asked. "Is it like Scienceville…wherever Scienceville is?"

"Honestly, I don't know. I never really thought about it for some reason."

She put her hand over his, her gaze only slightly unfocused. "So what made you start it?"

"The world's full of failed utopias, some good, some bad, some crazy. I just wanted to imagine one that worked." He winced. "I was only thirteen when I thought it up, and I didn't have any idea how things really worked." He'd used the coloured pens that came with the Vintage Craft Master World of Plants Poster Set his father gave him just a week before he walked out on Joel and his mother. "I put it away soon enough, but all those years later, after…" He shrugged.

She gave him a sympathetic look. "I heard all about the accident."

"Mom was driving, Dale was beside her. Ice on the road, the truck driver lost control…" He shrugged and forced a smile. "I guess that makes all this a coping mechanism."

She was silent a moment, then leaned in to kiss him. Her lips, thought Joel, tasted of jasmine and cherries.

"Well, Marge did say you were a bit different," she said when she pulled back. "Maybe you could show me the rest of your place?"

He woke in the morning alone and half-wrapped in his bedsheets to find a text message on his phone. *Thanks Joel. It's been a lousy week and a lousy year and you did a lot to make me feel better about myself. Take care. Sherylyn.*

Something in the words told him he wouldn't be seeing her again. For the first time in a long while he found himself wondering where he'd be in another five years, and if he'd still be on his own.

After breakfast, he made his way back down to the basement, intent on clearing up, and found he'd opened the folder where he'd put the two letters. He picked up the second one, from Natalie Donaldson, and read it again.

What the hell, he thought: you only live once.

Dear Ms Donaldson,

Thanks for your letter. I'm going to have to disagree with you about Atomic Road and Newton Avenue because I remember them incredibly well. Matter of fact, my parents worked at the particle research lab right where they intersect (the same lab, by the way, run by Dr Wu, after he escaped a Chinese prison through the fifth dimension). Were you there when the giant radioactive gorilla tried to climb up the top of the Halls of Justice back in 1998?

Anyway, thanks for sharing your thoughts.

Joel Kincaird

He couldn't help smirking to himself right after he posted the letter. *Giant radioactive gorilla.* Let's see how she likes that.

The reply came back just ten days later:

Hi Joel,

Well, I might not be remembering things exactly right, I'll admit. I was pretty sure it was a giant mutant sloth with death ray eyes, not a radioactive monkey, and that it all happened way back in the Fifties before either of us was born. However, I do recall when I was six I was sure I'd be senile by thirty, so clearly my faculties are deteriorating right on schedule. We should compare notes so I can maintain what slim grasp I still have on sanity a little while longer. Besides, I'm sure we'd have a lot to talk about.

Natalie

At the end of the letter, she had included her email address.

Joel had googled Milan, but not Natalie. He soon discovered that a Natalie Donaldson taught computer design at a local community college in Edinburgh. The photograph on the college website looked an awful lot like the one she had sent him.

"Oh man. Oh Jesus." Phil held Natalie's picture out at arm's length. "You've been catfished."

Joel stared at him, perplexed. "I've been what?"

"Tricked," said Phil, tossing the picture back over. "Conned. Ask her to Skype and I bet she won't because then you'd know she was faking. Why even waste your time, dude?" he demanded, "Why?"

"I'll admit to being a little surprised," said Chase, giving him a stare, "after hearing how things went the other night with Sherylyn."

"I don't like being set up," said Joel, "and neither did she. Sure, she was nice, but I bet she told Marge she's not interested in taking things any further. It was a one-off."

"So…something happened?" asked Phil, looking between them. Joel nodded. "And you're writing to some lunatic instead?" Phil cried out in anguish, clutching at his scalp. "Why?" he hissed, "*Why*?"

"Shut up, Phil." Chase turned back to him. "Marge wondered if maybe you freaked Sherylyn out by talking about your, uh, hobby. Did you?"

"Sure." Phil groaned. "Before she decided to spend the night," Joel added, "so I guess it wasn't such a bad idea."

Chase nodded in resignation. "You could still maybe call her," he said.

"I don't want to."

"Because this other woman – if it even *is* a woman – wrote this stupid letter?"

"Sure," said Joel. "Why not?"

"Because…" Chase shook his head in resignation. "Fine. Have it your way." He looked Joel hard in the eyes. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Of course not," said Joel, standing as the recess bell went. "Does anyone?"

The next weekend, he spent most of his time emailing back and forth with Natalie. It only took a few exchanges before they dropped any pretence about Scienceville being real, and he was surprised to learn just how much they had in common. Like him, she had suffered a terrible tragedy, losing both her parents and a sister in a car accident when she was nine.

Weeks passed, and then a month, and they emailed each other every night before finally moving to Skype. Natalie was first to broach the subject of meeting up. School was about to finish, she pointed out, and her college's summer term was drawing to an end. He could see how nervous she was, how much she used her jokes to cover her shyness.

"I've never been to Scotland," he said abruptly.

"Then I guess I'll have to show you around."

A week later, on the morning of his flight, a large, stiff-backed envelope arrived, again from Fredrick Milan. Joel stared at it, knowing it must contain a picture of some kind – an illustration, or a photograph, perhaps. His taxi arrived and honked its horn and he thought about taking it with him, but instead dropped it on the table by the door. Mail from genuine lunatics was the last thing he needed, and there was a long flight ahead.

She picked him up at the airport half a day later, and drove him into Edinburgh, pointing at the castle brooding high on its rock, at the winding cobbled streets, at the pipers busking along Princes Street, the skirl of their bagpipes making her wince (*I fucking hate bagpipes*, she told him). They spent that first day walking around and taking in the sights, although she steered him away from the castle, claiming it was a tourist trap. Instead they climbed Arthur's Seat, and he saw the whole town laid out before them as night descended.

At some point she took his hand and led him back to her cramped third-floor flat where they made noisy love until dawn.

"So why did you write in the first place?" he asked, as the first grey light showed through her bedroom window.

"I saw your picture on the gallery website. You had this look about you like you were lost. Then I read about how you lost your family, and it reminded me of me."

"You saw my picture online and you were struck by my overwhelming beauty?"

She punched his shoulder playfully. "I don't know. Why does anyone do anything? I hate sitting around and waiting for things to happen. I'd rather make them happen, wouldn't you?"

"So basically you just felt sorry for me," he said with a grin.

They took off in her ageing Volkswagen and went for a long weekend drive through the Highlands. He told her about the show, and how his sister had been the one who first put the gallery in touch with him, and how some other gallery in New York now wanted to put Scienceville on display.

"That's amazing!" she exclaimed. She was wearing the same grey slicker she'd worn in the photograph, taken, he learned, by an ex-boyfriend who went travelling in South America and never came back. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

"I only got the email the day before I flew over."

"Then I guess you've got extra motivation to finish the map," she said, steering carefully past some sheep that had invaded the narrow road ahead.

"What makes you think it isn't finished already?"

"You said it wasn't finished. That there was still more to be done."

He was pretty sure he hadn't said anything of the kind. "I only made the map in the first place to keep myself together after Dale died. It's nice having the attention, but…I thought even before I came over here that maybe it was time to stop." He reached out and squeezed her arm. "Maybe I don't need it any more."

"Well, maybe you shouldn't stop," she said. "Not if you don't think it's finished."

He laughed uneasily. "What does it matter? I'm glad I did it, because it brought me here. Maybe I'll do something else now, something completely different, and see if they want to put that in an art gallery too."

"You shouldn't do that," she said, her voice abrupt.

He stared at her. "What are you talking about?"

She shook her head, then guided the car to a stop by the side of the road once they were past the sheep. "You've been working on it for five years now. I don't want to be the reason you stopped doing something that means that much to you."

"But Natalie," he said carefully, "if you're the reason, you're the best possible reason. Surely…"

"I just—" Her face coloured, like she was angry, then she seemed to catch herself.

"Sorry," she said, and forced a smile. "I'll try and explain later."

But they didn't talk about it. Not that night, when they stayed in a former castle converted into a hotel, nor when they arrived back in Edinburgh the following night. They made love with the window open, the summer breeze cool against their skin, but Joel could sense something had changed and that it had to do with the map. Why, or how, he had no idea; but when he looked down at her, at her hair fanned around her face and those wide, bright eyes looking up at him, he couldn't bring himself to ask just what it was.

He knew only that he did not want this moment to end.

He woke to darkness and knew he'd never get back to sleep. He made his way down the narrow, creaking stairwell to Natalie's living room and pulled his MacBook out of its sleeve.

It wouldn't start up; nothing but an error message on the screen. He put it back, silently cursing, then remembered Natalie's computer in her office. Surely she wouldn't mind if he just checked his email…

She had two big flatscreen monitors and a large stylus pad for drawing. He checked his email and was about to get up when he saw a folder on the desktop called Scienceville.

He clicked on it and found it full of image files. One, called Waverley, opened up to a picture of a high street somewhere in the American Midwest, but rendered with some graphics package.

He zoomed in on a shop and saw its sign was in Russian as well as English. The towers and swooping skyways of central Scienceville were visible in the distance, and rendered in exquisite detail.

It was like seeing them for the first time… Indeed, almost like seeing them in real life.

He clicked on more pictures, icy tendrils encircling his heart. He was looking at Scienceville – but always from a distance. Its towers reached up from a far horizon, or above distant rooftops. There were mountains in the distance, but barely sketched in.

He selected more pictures and found himself looking at parts of Scienceville that had never been put in a show, posted online or seen by anyone but him. When he checked the dates, he discovered to his shock that some were apparently more than five years old…

A creak, from behind.

He turned to find Natalie standing by the door in a T-shirt that hung down to her bare knees. To his surprise, she looked as frightened as he felt.

"How long has this been going on?" he asked, the air cool and moist in his lungs.

"It's not what you think it is," she said, her voice husky.

He gestured at the screen, suddenly all too aware that he would have to get past her if he wanted to get out of the house. "How could you have known about all this before you even heard from me? How is it even possible?" A thought occurred to him. "I told you about the letter from Milan. Was that really you?"

"No. Look, I…" She pushed a hand against her temple, sweeping it back through her hair. "No, but I do know him. We talked about how to approach you, and Fred…well, he kind of jumped the gun, so we—"

"We?" Joel nearly shouted. "Who the hell is *we*?"

"All right," she said with a shaky breath. "Cards on the table. There are maybe a dozen of us, including me and Fredrick Milan. We found each other online. There's this book…"

The book, Joel learned, was called *Scienceville*. It had been published some time in the 1950s by an obscure writer called Wolfgang Ramble, and told the story of a town that changed the history of the world and ushered in an era of unlimited peace and prosperity. Ramble never published anything else, and both he and his book soon faded into obscurity.

Milan, then still a young man, and having already dreamt of that same imagined city long before he first stumbled across the book, immediately wrote to Ramble.

"I saw Milan's art online," said Joel, remembering the unopened mail from Milan back home. "I didn't see anything that made me think of Scienceville."

"That's because none of that stuff is online," she explained. "But I can show you."

No one, she explained, had ever shown the slightest interest in Milan's paintings of Scienceville, which were far more traditional and representational than the abstract work he was now famous for. She stepped past Joel and tapped at the keyboard, opening a new folder and bringing up yet more images. She showed Joel a series of Milan's paintings that struck him as bucolic, even kitsch, although immediately recognisable to him, if no one else. If you weren't aware of their significance, they appeared utterly forgettable – like something you'd find in a thrift store.

Having made contact, Ramble and Milan kept in touch. After all, if two people who had never previously met could have powerful visions of the same imaginary place, who was to say there might not be a third?

But it wasn't until the arrival of the internet that those few who dreamed of Scienceville finally found each other.

"Every one of us had some tragedy in our lives that seemed to trigger the connection," Natalie explained. "Milan saw his entire family murdered by Nazis. Ramble found his parents dead after they killed themselves. Your dad left you, but it took your mother and your fiancée both dying to put you on the path. And…you know about me."

"Why not just tell me all this at the start?" asked Joel.

"And would you have believed me?" She nodded at one of Milan's paintings on the screen. "You didn't believe *him*. I never even thought of making a map of the city; none of us did. That you did has to mean *something*."

Some of his earlier alarm began to creep back. "What do you mean it has to 'mean something'?"

There was a wild gleam in her eyes he hadn't seen before. "Scienceville reached out to us, Joel. We didn't invent it – it brought us *to* it, don't you see? It's using us to find a way into the world."

A sick feeling grew in the pit of Joel's stomach. He stood, pushing past her towards the door.

"Where are you going?" she asked, alarmed.

"Nowhere," he lied, one hand on the frame as he looked back at her. "I just need time to think. None of this makes any sense."

"I didn't mean you to find out like this," she

said. "I'm sorry, I just didn't think…" She cursed under her breath. "Look. Just imagine, just for a minute, that Scienceville is real. Can you really tell me it isn't?"

He hesitated at the door.

"You can't say it isn't, can you?" she said, triumph creeping into her voice. "You can feel it."

"It's not real, Natalie."

Even so, she was right about one thing: saying it somehow felt wrong.

"But it could be real!" she insisted. "Think about all the things that are wrong in the world. You read the news and you wonder just how many more generations we get before the human race dies out. That makes Scienceville all the more important – and why you have to finish the map."

"And what the hell do you think happens then?"

"I think it'll become real," she said.

Joel laughed. "We'll just wake up one morning and Scienceville's just…there?"

She slammed a hand on the wall beside her hard enough to make him jump. "Just *listen*. One of us is a theoretical physicist. He says there's all these multiple realities stacked one on top of another, each one with a very slightly different history from the next. He thinks the fact we all dream about Scienceville means those universes could merge somehow. If he's right, we could make Scienceville real. Wouldn't you rather live in that world?"

"Look," he said carefully, "when I was a kid, dreaming all this up, I had no idea how the real world worked. Scienceville isn't a democracy. It doesn't answer to anyone or anything, and that's just one reason the world's in as big a mess as it is. A bunch of mad scientists with made-up jetpacks and robot servants aren't going to fix one damn thing, real or otherwise."

"Joel, I—"

"I don't believe in utopias," he said abruptly. "They all turn into nightmares the moment someone tries to make them real. If I thought even for a second that anything you told me is true, I'd…I'd burn the damn map."

Natalie stared at him, mute.

He went upstairs and got dressed and packed the rest of his clothes as fast as he could. She didn't say anything at all until he got down to the front door.

"Please, Joel," she said at last. "Don't leave. Not like this."

"Then at least admit you made all of this up."

She stared at him in fury. She had been holding something in her hand, and she threw it at him. He put his arm up to shield himself.

"Fuck you, Joel," she snarled. "Look, why don't you? Look!"

A mouldering paperback, decades old, lay on the pavement by his foot. It was called *Scienceville*, and the author's name was Wolfgang Ramble. Some of its pages had come loose when it hit the pavement.

He stared down at it, then picked up his case and made his way down the street and away from Natalie, he hoped, for ever.

Eighteen long hours and a change of ticket later, Joel arrived back home to find summer had given way to autumn. He picked up Milan's envelope from the table he'd left it on, carrying it down to the basement and staring at the finely detailed streets and districts laid out all across the floor.

For the first time, the sight of it frightened him.

He opened the envelope: it contained a colour photocopy of one of the images Natalie had shown him. He threw it into a metal wastebasket along with an accompanying letter, sight unseen.

He went upstairs and lay back on his own bed, imagining towers and buildings spontaneously erupting from the soil like great glistening teeth, and remembered what he had said about destroying the map. As if Natalie, or Milan, or anyone else had the right to change history, to judge the real world errant and alter it according to their whim…

He closed his eyes. He dreamed he was looking out his kitchen window, but instead of the row of maples fronting his neighbours' houses, he saw Scienceville's broad boulevards, driverless electric cars floating high above buried superconductor strips and dodging pedestrians and bicycles with silent computerised efficiency. Cargo blimps floated far overhead like shoals of fat fish, and when he stepped outside and felt the warm sun on his face, he somehow had the sense that

this was more than just a dream.

He woke, sweat clinging to his skin. He checked his watch and saw he'd been asleep for more than twelve hours.

Then he heard a thump from downstairs. When it was followed by a faint squeal, he knew without doubt someone had just opened the basement door.

Back when they got engaged, one of Dale's cousins gave her a gun and made a joke about shooting him if he ever got out of line. They put it in a shoebox hidden beneath a loose plank behind the toilet cistern.

Joel dug it out as quietly as he could and loaded it, then dropped it in the pocket of his bath robe. He had no idea if the damn thing even worked after all these years, but he felt better for having it.

He crept downstairs and saw the back door lock had been jimmied. The basement door was fractionally open, and the lights were on. He heard low voices, then a muffled cough.

He grabbed hold of his keys, then stepped outside with his cellphone and dialled 911. The dispatcher told him to sit tight and wait for a car to arrive. Then he stepped back inside to listen again and heard a softer voice mixed in with the others: Natalie.

He made his way down the basement steps and found her there with two other men, standing around the edges of the map. One he recognised as Fredrick Milan; he was bent-backed and frail-looking, but his eyes were filled with a fierce energy. The other, whom he didn't recognise, looked a few decades younger than Milan, with olive skin and white hair cut close to the scalp. He stared at Joel, clearly terrified. A number of folders had been opened and their contents carefully laid out across those few parts of the basement floor not already covered by the map.

Instead of anger, Joel felt only a devouring sadness. "What the hell are you people doing?" he demanded.

"Mr Kincaird," said the second man, his voice trembling. "We came here as fast as we could. We were afraid you might make a terrible mistake."

"Who the hell are you?" Joel demanded.

"His name is Jose Vargas," said Natalie, speaking up. "He's the physicist I told you about. Please, Joel. We're here to help you."

"Help me?" He barked out a laugh. "Just get the hell out of my house and never come back!"

"The map," said Milan. "You told Natalie you intended to burn it. We are here to prevent that."

His voice radiated surprising authority. The way he looked at Joel made him feel as if he were the intruder, rather than the other way round.

"I said you didn't really mean it," Natalie blurted. "I got the first flight I could and they insisted on meeting up with me."

"What I do with the map," Joel said evenly, "is my choice."

"You must not harm it," said Vargas, his voice shrill. "You would be committing a terrible crime!"

Milan put a hand on Vargas's arm. "Mr Kincaird," the old man said, "I understand how strange all this must be, how very unreal. But despite appearances we are all three of us sane, and quite sincere. I know Natalie told you about our shared dreams and experiences. Until now, all we had were unrelated fragments of Scienceville, but your map, we believe, is the final piece necessary to conjure that world into existence. We have known all this – felt it – for much of our lives, as did Wolfgang Ramble." He pointed at Joel. "As have you."

"No." Joel flexed his fingers, but couldn't help remembering the dream. It had been so vivid, so real. "I think you've all convinced yourselves," he said. "Like some insane cult." Milan was an old man, and Vargas was shaking like a leaf. Adrenaline made the blood thump in his ears.

"He has a gun," said Milan, very calmly, his eyes on the bulge in Joel's robe pocket.

Vargas muttered something under his breath in Spanish that might have been a prayer. Joel slid the gun out and held it by his side with the muzzle pointed at the floor.

"Joel, please…"

Milan shook his head sadly. "He doesn't want to listen, Miss Donaldson. Nothing will convince a man who doesn't want to be convinced, not with all the evidence in the world."

"You're wrong," said Joel. "It's not that I don't

want to believe. I do. But if what you're saying is true, what does it matter if there's a map or not? It's just paper and ink. What the hell does it matter if we believe in it or not?"

"Then why the dreams?" asked Milan. "Why the obsession? Listen to what Jose has to say – the universe and how it works is far stranger than we can imagine."

Sirens, in the distance. Coming closer.

"What have you done!" demanded Vargas.

"I called the police," Joel replied.

Natalie stared at him. "You didn't—"

"I heard intruders in my house," said Joel. "Why wouldn't I?"

"We need to get out of here," said Vargas.

Joel shook his head. "I locked the basement door. You're staying right here until the cops arrive, all three of you."

He stepped towards Vargas, who ducked out of his way, and picked up the metal wastebasket, placing it on the edge of his desk.

He turned so he could see all three of them, the gun still in his right hand, and used his left to scoop up some of the pages of the map from the floor. He shovelled them one-handed into the bucket, then slid a desk drawer open and extracted a lighter.

"Joel," Natalie begged. "Stop."

"Even if I believed you," he said, his voice trembling, "you don't have the right. No one does." He flicked the lighter on. "If I'd never heard from you, I might have gone right on working on the map. But not now. Not any more."

He applied the flame to the edge of a sheet. It burned quickly, and within seconds bright orange flames rushed upwards. Joel heard a roaring in his ears, an express-train rush of blood that made him giddy.

The sirens drew closer, then faded into the distance once more.

"He's lying," Vargas shouted. "He didn't call the police!"

But I did, Joel was about to say, when Natalie rushed him.

She grabbed for the gun, and he turned sideways to block her, his elbow knocking the wastebasket onto the floor. The gun went spinning into a corner, the contents of the wastebasket scattering across the map on the floor and sending up clouds of burning ash and smoke that blinded him.

He twisted away from her, coughing and gagging and his eyes smarting.

"Put it out!" he heard Vargas screech, as if from very far away. "Put it out!"

Joel's vision cleared enough that he could see Natalie and the two men desperately trying to grab up as much of the map as they could. They didn't appear to realise how quickly the flames were spreading, or that some of the wall hangings had also caught fire.

Soon the basement was filled with choking black smoke. Joel pulled his robe over the lower part of his face and felt along the wall with one hand until he had reached the stairs beneath the basement door. Then he realised with a terrible lurch he had dropped his keys, most likely when Natalie tackled him.

He twisted around, and saw nothing but grey and black billows of ash that blinded him.

It was getting harder to breathe. He stumbled back down the steps, desperate to find the keys before it was too late, and collided with someone. When he felt hands on his face, he knew without a doubt it was Natalie.

He tried to draw breath, but there was nothing left but smoke and ash. He felt it filling his lungs, hot and thick and choking. He clung to Natalie, but before long he felt himself spiralling down into a darkness that had no end.

With a soft hum, the fire engine lifted into the blue morning skies to join the rest of the morning traffic headed downtown.

"We found four bodies," said Detective Harper, "one woman, three men, all in a basement locked from the inside. There's signs of a struggle, but I can't say anything definite until forensics file their report."

"Perhaps not," said the seven-foot silver-skinned android facing him. "But if you were to make a preliminary conjecture…?"

Harper glanced at the nearby house. It stood on its own, surrounded by a small fenced lawn. Its walls were blackened, although the actual burn damage to the upper floors was minimal. A small white tent had been erected on the lawn to conceal the bodies they'd recovered.

When the android had shown up half an hour before, complete with the authorisation to take over the investigation, Harper had made it a point of honour to kick up as much of a fuss as possible. First he called the Assistant Commissioner, then the Commissioner, then the Assistant Mayor and finally the Mayor himself, demanding to know why a machine belonging to Scienceville's High-Energy Physics Research Lab had been given the right to interfere in a police matter.

In the end, however, he had been forced to concede defeat.

"All right," Harper replied. "I think they were terrorists, planning something big in time for Founding Day. One of them got cold feet and tried to destroy their plans, and there was a struggle. The fire spread so fast they probably didn't even have time to react."

"I was given to understand," said the android, "that no bomb-making facilities were found – nothing, in fact, that might suggest terrorists or anything of that nature."

"Look," Harper snapped, "maybe they weren't building bombs down there, but they did have highly detailed hand-drawn maps of all of Scienceville's major precincts, including all the research facilities. We found half-burned, hand-compiled histories not just of the city, but most of Scienceville's leading civilians! Add the fact we can't identify any of the deceased, let alone who even owns this property, and it's not hard to guess these people were planning something unpleasant."

"Almost as if," suggested the android, "the house and its occupants dropped out of the sky from nowhere."

Something in the way the android said this unsettled Harper. "I'm sure we'll get to the bottom of it."

"But why," the machine insisted, "would terrorists not only hand-draw maps, but make them large and detailed enough to cover an entire basement floor? And why hand-compile information about our citizens, rather than acquiring it online? Why not simply purchase maps of the city?"

Harper had no answer to that.

The machine nodded. "Thank you for your input, Detective, but this investigation is now a classified matter. If you could ask your men to finish up, we can bring in our own teams and—"

"Now wait just one second," said Harper, his temper eroding. "I don't care if it's classified or not, I want to know why a *research* lab gets to take over a police investigation!"

The machine glanced over Harper's head at the smouldering ruins, then back. "Very well then. But I can't promise to make the matter any clearer."

"Go ahead."

"Our current conjecture is that this house is proof of an imperfect merging of an abstract number of closely related alternate realities. It may in turn also represent proof of an underlying mechanism behind any number of inexplicable phenomena observed throughout history, ranging from sightings of the Yeti to reports of advanced civilisations hidden in remote valleys, to unidentified flying—"

"That's enough." Harper could feel a headache coming on.

"You did ask. Is there anything else I can do for you, Detective? Or can I bring my men in now?"

"I'm good, thanks," he said with a sigh, picking up his jetpack and strapping it back on. "If you need me, I'll be at police headquarters."

The charred ruins of the house soon dwindled beneath his feet. He caught sight of the bronze statue in Waverley Park, of the giant radioactive ape that briefly terrorised the city back in '58, and used it to orient himself. Farmlands soon came into view, great long rows of tiered hydroponics that stretched all the way to the mountains and the very edge of the force field that surrounded and protected Scienceville from the ravaged, lifeless continent beyond.

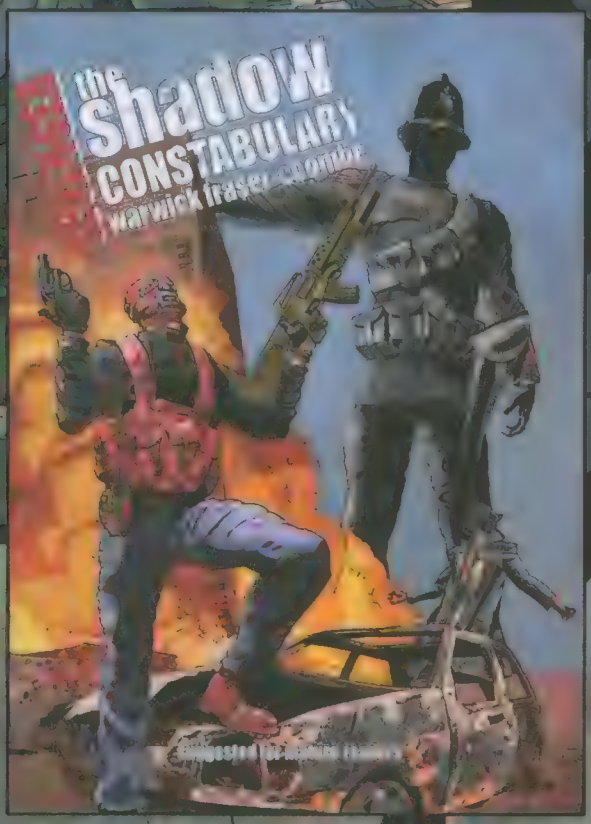
Before very long he had joined the rest of the morning traffic en route to downtown – and with any luck, he'd never have to think about that damn house and its mysterious inhabitants ever again.

Gary Gibson is the author of nine novels, including *Stealing Light* and *Final Days*. His tenth, *Survival Game*, a sequel to *Extinction Game*, is due from Tor in 2016. A Glaswegian by birth and by inclination, he currently resides in Taipei in the Far East. He has a blog at www.garygibson.net.

REVENGER

the shadow CONSTABULARY

warwick fraser-coombe



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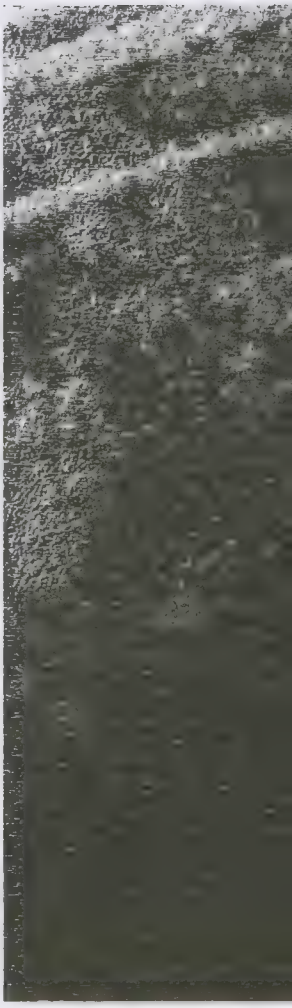

Ken's short fiction has appeared in *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *BuzzyMag*, *Abyss & Apex*, as well as *Interzone* and various anthologies. His first short story collection *Fortune's Fantasy* was released last year. *Alaana's Way* is his epic fantasy series with an arctic twist published by Cat's Cradle Press. You can preview this work and others at the author's website: www.KenAltabef.com.

THIS WAS DEFINITELY NOT THE WAY I WANTED TO spend my Memorial Day weekend. A hundred and forty miles, slogging through holiday traffic. Driving's what I do most days anyway, but it's a hell of a lot easier to cut through the baking summer heat with a flashing light bar and a yelping siren.

A nice barbecue at a neighbor's house, a lawn chair, a couple cans of beer. Would've been nice.

Instead, a sick room in a ramshackle house way out in the backwaters of Libertyville, PA. As the rent-a-nurse let me in, I caught a guilty flash in her eyes. She could tell I was a cop even out of uniform.

"He's in the bedroom," she said as I scanned the interior of the living room. Not much to see. Beaten-down couch and chairs, an old picture tube television, a three-legged coffee table and those stacks of musty magazines and yellowed newspapers old people always seem to collect.

"How's he look?"

"The coughing's bad," she said. I think. It might just as easily have been "The coffin's bad" and still been appropriate. She shrugged a hefty shoulder and turned away.

"Right."

I edged past her and went down the hall. Peeling wallpaper and stained carpets. If there had been anything of value in this house she'd picked it clean already.

I almost didn't recognize the old man. My uncle, I should say my great uncle, was a sore sight for the eyes. A long, hard life had left him a withered husk, swaddled in frayed blankets. Half-asleep, deathly pale, one side of his mouth hung flaccidly, a lasting reminder of some kind of a stroke.

He seemed a far cry from the man I remembered. I'd only met Uncle Dimitri once before, thirty years ago. It had been Christmas Eve. My grandfather, Dimitri's brother, had passed away in mid-December. Dimitri hadn't made it to the funeral but showed up at my father's house on the night before Christmas. I was twelve. To me, Dimitri was an almost fantastical figure dressed in a long coal-black coat and battered boots. His wild eyebrows and tangle of dark beard, that hooked nose. A real Russian! He didn't have presents for us. It didn't matter. His thick Muscovite accent was enough to send my imagination flying.

Thinking back on it now, after twenty years of police work, the whole thing seems incredibly suspicious. Couldn't go to his own brother's funeral. It was too public. But at Christmas he was lost in the crowd. Just another relative from out of town, drawn to a nondescript house in the middle of a residential block.

I thought about the long drive back to New York. Maybe it wasn't too late. Damn. He'd seen me.

"Frank," he hissed, waving me closer. "I knew you'd come."

I cleared my throat and approached the bed. The old man suddenly sat up and waved a palsied hand frantically at my feet. "Watch! Watch!"

There was a dog wedged under the bed. I'd almost stepped on its tail.

"My dog. Laika."

Something vaguely familiar about that name. I tried to tell the breed but it was hard, the dog was wound all the way around itself. It seemed to be shivering.

Dimitri coughed softly. "They built—"

That was as far as he got before a fit of coughing broke his stride. Eventually he added, "I never smoked." He jabbed an index finger at me. "I never smoked a day in my life."

"Me neither."

"They built a monument to her – for the dog. A statue. Here, let me show you." He yanked open a drawer on his nightstand and began to rummage.

"Uncle…it really isn't necessary."

"It is."

He handed me an old photograph. It was an odd sort of a monument, stuck in front of a gray brick building. A dog in harness stood atop a small rocket shaped like an open hand. The inscription was in Russian. The whole thing was speckled with snow.

The dog in the statue was a perky little mongrel with a white and black coat. Part huskie for sure, but it looked mostly terrier to me. It stood in a heroic pose, leaning forward and alert, ears up, tail pointed. If there was any resemblance to the shivering thing huddled under the bed, I couldn't see it.

"The first living creature ever sent into orbit." Dimitri shot a proud glance down at the dog at his feet. I'll spare you further descriptions of his coughing fits. Just imagine a phlegmy interruption every six words or so. "She deserved the statue. Her 'training' was a nightmare. She was confined to smaller and smaller cages for weeks at a time, subjected to g-forces and loud noise to simulate blast off, given only a special high-nutrition gel to eat. Yecch. A terrible, pasty goo it was." The tip of his gray tongue slid out of his mouth in mock-disgust. "The night before the launch, I took Laika home to play with my children. We wanted to do something nice for her. She had so little time left to live."

Now the name clicked. Laika, the Space Dog. I tried to remember the details. "She died, that dog…"

"No." He shook his head. "No. The initial report said she died when her oxygen ran out on day six. But that wasn't true. After a while the Soviet government claimed she was euthanized with poisoned food prior to suffocation. But that was just a fairy tale to satisfy the protesters." He coughed softly, shaking his head again. "Official documents weren't released until 2002. Typical Russian bureaucracy. Took them that long to make up their minds what story to tell. The papers said she died of overheating when the central R-7 sustainer failed to separate from the payload. That wasn't true either. I know. I was there. I was a biologist you know – in those days."

"I didn't know."

"Let me tell you. Oxygen depletion, poison, all bullshit, you know. Typical Russian bullshit. I worked at the Onskirk Space Initiative. When it first happened, when she came back, they didn't say anything. Khrushchev was always very cautious. They had a hero dog all right, but some-

thing was strange about her, something was wrong and they didn't know what."

"Uncle, that was sixty years ago."

"I know when it was. I was there. She survived re-entry. They fished her out of the Caspian Sea. Officially that never happened. Officially a lot of things didn't happen back then, as now. But Laika had changed. She was restless, wouldn't eat much, and the whining. The whining was maddening. Day and night. Not so much any more. But back then…

"We couldn't find anything physically wrong. And that was a problem. Manned flights were already scheduled and her strange condition had frightening implications for the cosmonauts. They sent up other dogs, they sent up a monkey. Nothing happened. But still there was Laika and she was in pain. Not physical, you understand. We couldn't find anything physical except that she gives off a low level radiation. It showed up right away on our scintillators – that's what we called Geiger counters back then. It's completely harmless stuff, but you should know."

Said the man with terminal lymphoma, I thought.

"What had happened to her up there? We didn't know. We were monitoring her the whole time, and still we couldn't tell. The Block A core failed to separate as planned, some thermal insulation tore loose, her pulse rate tripled." He sighed heavily. "I don't understand it. And now back on earth she was skittish and miserable. They wanted to check her brain. And you know we didn't have CAT scans back then. They were going to vivisect her. They wanted me to do it! I couldn't argue with Khrushchev. I couldn't fight them, but I wouldn't allow it either. She was different. I knew. She sings! Did I tell you that?"

"You aren't trying to tell me this is the same dog?"

No answer.

"She looks sick," I added.

"She's fine. She always looks like that. She can be a trial sometimes. She whines at night. Sometimes all night. The name Laika means 'Barker'. Did you know that? She was a real scrapper once, a mongrel off the streets of Moscow. We always used Moscow strays. We assumed they'd already learned to endure hunger and extreme cold. She doesn't bark anymore. Still, you have to keep her where no one can hear. That's important."

The man was totally insane. I looked at the picture again. "That was Sputnik?"

"Sputnik 2. 1958," he mused. "Did they know I had taken her? Did they suspect? No. Who was I? I was nothing. Some anonymous behavioral biologist. Ha! They didn't even know my first name, half of them. They thought it was Yuri Karkhov the cosmonaut. Karkhov denied it of course but they never really trusted him anyway. Trust was bought with blood in those days. I guess it still is. I don't know."

He'd worked himself into quite a state, practically blue in the face with all the coughing. Sitting ramrod straight, wearing a loose T-shirt, I saw just how emaciated he had become.

"Take it easy, take it easy," I said. I tried to push him gently back down, but he resisted.

"Getting out wasn't easy. There was a night in Luchev… I killed two policemen, left their bodies in the snow. Did you know that?"

"You know I'm a cop, right?"

"Ha! So what are you going to do, Mr Policeman? Send me back? To Siberia?"

"Well it is a pretty cold case, I guess." I hated myself for joking about dead cops, even communists, but I was desperate to lighten the mood.

"She's all I have left."

I knew some of his story. And what I didn't know, I could guess easily enough. He'd been hiding a long time. The last passport he'd held had been on Soviet paper. USSR, not Russian. That he'd wound up in a place called Libertyville was more than a little ironic.

His two children – the ones who had played with Laika the night before her launch – were both dead. His wife was gone. He had suffered nothing but heartbreak and hardship from exile, through the Cold War, to a lonely miserable old age. He'd lost everything, but he kept going. He was one stubborn son of a bitch.

"I'm not long for this world, Frank. I have some papers, funeral arrangements, just enough savings to cover it. I won't put any of that on you."

"Fine," I said, taking a deep breath. Time to go. "I'll take care of it."

"But there's just one other thing, Frank, the most important thing. The reason why I needed

you to come." He settled back into the bed. He was almost done.

"The dog?"

"Yes, the dog. Laika. Laika. I need someone to do for her what I've done. To take care of her. To protect her. Can you do that?"

"That's not a problem. I love dogs."

"Take her home. Tonight."

"Uncle, I—"

"Don't say anything. The dog. Do what I did. Protect her. Take care of her." He fell asleep. For a minute I thought he'd given up the ghost right then and there, but his little birdcage chest was still rising and falling softly. I knew he wouldn't die until after I did what he wanted. I was certain of it. He was one tough son of a bitch.

I HAULED THE DOG INTO THE FRONT SEAT of my RV. I felt sorry for her. I really do love dogs and have owned quite a few over the years. What the hell I was going to do with this one, I didn't know. She scampered into the back seat and huddled down onto the floor. Well, I hadn't really expected her to stick her head out the window and wag her tongue. And then the whining started.

I made tracks back to New York, my eyes burning, my lower back aching, and my attention drifting dangerously. I even got stopped on the I-78 by a Jersey Trooper. He almost ticketed me before I showed him my badge. He didn't say anything about the dog.

It was after midnight when I pulled into my driveway. I had a helluva time getting that dog out of the car. I guess she felt safe down there in the back. She wouldn't answer to the name Laika or any other name. She was too skittish to let me pet her. How old was she? A full grown, white and black, mixed breed terrier. No gray, and her eyes were clear, but she acted like she was sixty and moved like she was eighty. Who knew what living with that crazy old man had done to her? Feeding his twisted fixation on dear old Laika with a new look-alike every few years. I know an abused animal when I see one. I wasn't looking forward to nursing her back to health either. That's a long road, but what else could I do?

I thought maybe once I put a good meal into her she'd settle down a little. I had picked up some dry dog food and fresh chopped meat on the way home. Tried the chop meat first. She didn't eat much of either.

I've had dogs before and my yard is fenced and secure, but she insisted on following me inside with that slow slinking gait of hers, her muzzle low to the ground.

And then the whining started again. I dug out some old doggie toys from the closet. No soap there either. I turned on the TV and popped a beer. Even the late movie, some black and white horror show from the 50s, was better than watching her paw restlessly at my carpet.

The dog's cries became more frantic as the night went on. It sounded as if I were torturing someone in my basement. Thankfully my closest neighbors live five hundred yards away and pine trees scatter noise quite effectively. If anyone had heard this, there would've been a knock on my door already. She wouldn't let me hold her. I sat listening to her shrieks of terror and fear, feeling helpless and impotent.

Laika continued whining as I fell asleep in front of the TV. Tomorrow was still the tail-end of the holiday and I'd have the full day with her, maybe take her to the park and see if she'd run a little. It was as good a way as any to cap a lousy weekend.

And then, sometime deep in the night, she sang to me.

I thought I must be dreaming, and maybe that was how it started, but when I woke up the headache was real, the nausea was real. The sound was horrible, just impossible to describe, such a garbled noise never meant to come from the tortured throat of a mongrel terrier. But it wasn't the sound that was important. It was the lights, the colors…

I stumbled from the chair like a blind man groping in the dark. I couldn't see anything except the colored lights. A million different colors, throbbing, popping, exploding behind my eyes. Their effect was chaotic and maddeningly alien. Undecipherable. A bizarre and distant landscape, to be sure. Paradise lost.

The song was so sad it became beautiful, like when water is so hot it feels cold. I thought of a phrase coined by Buzz Aldrin on the Moon. Magnificent desolation. From sadness to beauty and back again, all in an instant. Isolation, disorientation, loneliness. Desperation.

I had a sickening feeling in my stomach, like when you lean over a railing, looking down at a steep drop, wondering what would really happen if you fell. Feeling like you'd never come back. You'd be lost forever. Or worse. You'd be falling and falling but never die.

I don't know how long it went on, with me huddled on the floor like a sick drunk, retching and blind. The insane, twisted agony of the light show finally faded, leaving only a splitting headache in its wake.

Laika sat quietly beside me, licking softly at the palm of my hand. She looked at me through half-closed eyes, but didn't really see me. The song was like a hairball, building up and burning and irritating until it had to be coughed up. She'd bought herself a moment of peace, but this had been going on for a long, long time and it wasn't over.

I hear you, whoever you are. Whatever you are. Our lights, our world, must be just as maddening to you as yours are to my eyes. Just as painful. I'm a monster to you, aren't I? A hideous, terrifying monster.

I resolved to do what Dimitri should have done long ago, if the stubborn bastard had only known how. But my great uncle wouldn't ever give up. He didn't know anything about mercy, only resolve.

He had asked all the wrong questions. He wanted to know what had happened to Laika in orbit. The real question was what had she found? What had she brought back?

It crossed my mind that a team of scientists, given enough time, might possibly decipher what those horrifying lights meant. A legion of dispassionate and analytical faces, staring down at Laika. Given enough time and CT scans and tests and probes. Maybe. And Laika had all the time in the world, or so it seemed. Somewhere down the line they might come to understand her message better than I did. Yeah, maybe. And maybe not.

I've drawn my weapon exactly six times in my career, and I've shot two men. Didn't kill either one. But unholstering my nine-millimeter, all alone in the woods, and pressing it to the back of that dog's head was one of the hardest things I've ever done. I love dogs. And extraterrestrials too, I guess.

But what else could I do? Sometimes giving up is a mercy, too. Like when a dog is run over and suffering. What do you do then?

BOOK ZONE

THE THREE-BODY PROBLEM
Cixin Liu

THE DARK FOREST
Cixin Liu

THE BONE CLOCKS
David Mitchell

SLADE HOUSE
David Mitchell

THE HOUSE OF SHATTERED WINGS
Aliette de Bodard

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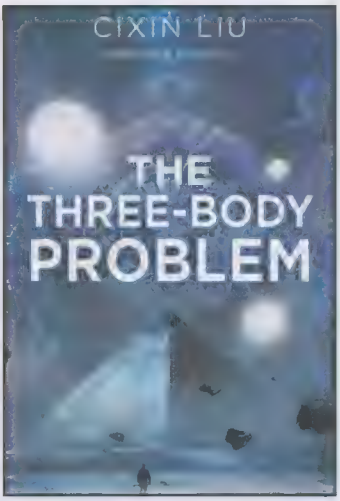
THE GRACEKEEPERS
Kirsty Logan

HEART OF THE ORIGINAL
Steve Aylett

STORIES FOR CHIP: A TRIBUTE TO SAMUEL R. DELANY
Edited by Nisi Shawl & Bill Campbell



THE THREE-BODY PROBLEM
Cixin Liu
translated by Ken Liu
Head of Zeus hb, 400pp, £16.99

THE DARK FOREST
Cixin Liu
translated by Joel Martinsen
Head of Zeus hb, 512pp, £16.99

Jack Deighton

Barring Verne and the genre's very beginnings, non-Anglophone SF has historically had a low profile in its heartlands. Some Eastern European SF did manage to filter across the language barrier during the Iron Curtain days but was usually a niche commodity. That situation has recently begun to change markedly with SF emanating from outwith the usual source countries. Though not all from non-Anglophone sources, in the past few years I have been able to sample SF originating from Japan, Finland, Israel, South Africa, Nigeria and other former colonial states. Now, aided by Puppygate and its unintended consequence of a best novel Hugo Award for Cixin Liu, his *Remembrance of Earth's Past* trilogy looks set to raise the profile of Chinese Science Fiction; which on this evidence comprises hard SF, red in tooth and claw (though arguably not red in political terms).

The first book, *The Three-Body Problem*, begins during the Cultural Revolution when Ye Wenjie witnesses the death of her father, a physicist unwilling to bend to the doctrine that the theories which underpin his subject are reactionary, at the hands of Red Guards. Ye herself is sent to a labour camp and further blots her copybook when she reads Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and pens a letter to the authorities about the environmental depredations resulting from the work of her labour corps but due to her capabilities as a physicist she is assigned to Red Coast Base, an apparently military endeavour.

There is then a jump of forty years in the narrative and we are plunged into a world where nano-materials researcher Wang Miao is co-opted into a Battle Command Centre – a committee whose members comprise not only Chinese but also NATO generals plus the unorthodox but effective cop Shi Qiang. The world faces a threat (at this point unspecified) related to the fact that physicists are killing themselves as their experimental results are not consistent,

leading them to the conclusion that physics varies from place to place and so does not exist. Shi Qiang warns Wang always to look behind the surfaces of things to find the deeper connections.

Strange things begin to happen to Wang; he sees a countdown on his photographs and then on his eyes. This stops when he ceases his research. His wider investigations lead him to an online game at www.3body.net, the playing of which requires a haptic feedback suit, and which is set on a curious world with unreliable sunrises and sunsets, Stable and Chaotic Eras, mysterious flying stars and inhabitants who can dehydrate and rehydrate according to the conditions. Each time he logs into it the game's history has moved on. He works out the planet has three suns whose orbits form an inherently chaotic configuration. This is Trisolaris. In one of the novel's structural problems the relevance of this game to the ongoing threat is not revealed till later.

We subsequently find Red Coast was actually a site for SETI investigations and Ye Wenjie had used its antenna – via the sun as a signal amplifier – to send a message to the universe. A reply containing a warning of invasion if Earth responds came from only four light years away and therefore must have originated on Alpha Centauri. The disillusioned Ye, convinced that humanity's relationship to evil is like the iceberg to the ocean (made of the same material) ignores the warning. Meanwhile a secretive Earth Trisolaran Organisation, ETO, has recruited devotees via 3-body and communicated with the Trisolarans who have developed Project Sophon, the unfolding of protons into different dimensions, to shoot a quantum entangled pair at Earth to completely ruin scientific research and seal off the progress of human science. The Alpha Centauri system of course contains three suns.

The trouble is we are told a lot of this via the medium of 3-body and transcripts of Trisolaran transmissions – most of which content is dry as dust. Human interactions are sidelined, the main instigator of ETO, Mike Evans, advocate of Pan-Species Communism, barely appears in the novel and the chronology of the events is disjointed. While Wang's nanomaterials background comes in useful in obtaining the Trisolaran transcripts the incident concerned is really the only one which occurs in the novel's here-and-now.

In his translator's afterword Ken Liu refers to Chinese fiction having different emphases and preferences "compared to what American readers expect". Whether this explains the oddness of *The Three-Body Problem*'s structure the non-Chinese reader cannot tell. And nothing is resolved, the whole is merely a prologue.

In *The Dark Forest* the narrative is much more linear. Earth has 450 years to prepare for the Trisolaran invasion but is now riddled with sophons, making all transactions transparent to Trisolaris. The UN has set up a Planetary Defence Council which initiates the Wallfacer Project whereby four individuals are given more or less absolute power to command resources to further the anti-Trisolaran plans devised in their own minds (the sophons cannot read thoughts). One character muses, "I wonder whether we could find a form of communication that only humans can comprehend, but which the sophons never will. That way, humanity can be free of sophon monitoring… A gaze or a smile can transmit so much information!"

The first part of the book follows the progress of the Wallfacers' plans, the setting up and development of Earth's space forces and

the societal changes which take place under the Trisolaran threat. "Behind them was the Golden Age, the good times that began in the 1980s and ended with the Crisis. Ahead of them, humanity's arduous years were about to unfold."

The disparity in force between Earth and Trisolaris is the biggest in human history, defeatism the worst enemy – especially in the space forces. Escapism, the thought of leaving Earth for the wide blue yonder, appeals to some but is soon made illegal as who goes and who remains involves basic human values no matter who gets to leave – elites, the rich, or ordinary people. So long as some will be left behind, it means the collapse of humanity's ethical value system. One character says, "The fundamental axiom of economics is the human mercenary instinct. Without that assumption, the entire field would collapse. There isn't any fundamental axiom for sociology yet, but it might be even darker than economics. A small number of people could fly off into space, but if we knew it would come to that, why would we have bothered in the first place?"

There are still occasional forays into 3-body where we find Trisolaris has designated a Wallbreaker to each Wallfacer, to frustrate or reveal their plans.

Curiously – or is this an endemic Chinese habit? – smoking seems to be commonplace in this future even when we have again jumped in time to year 205 of the Crisis Era, after a minor Dark Age called the Great Ravine has more than halved Earth's population. Most cities are now underground.

The narrative contains a few potential sense of wonder moments. Giant space telescopes, the seeding of space with oil film, "mined" from Neptune's rings, to reveal the tracks of Trisolaran probes, a space battle which came over eerily like an updated version of E.E. 'Doc' Smith, and other Science Fictional concepts such as the technology to fix beliefs in the human brain. However, there are times when the info dumping can be intrusive, and strange interludes such as when Liu allows his characters to discourse on the writing process: "The highest level of literary creation is when the characters in a novel possess life in the mind of the writer. The writer is unable to control them. But today's practitioners of literature have lost that creativity"; and the nature of the object of love: "not the man or woman of reality, but what he or she is like in their imagination".

Key to the book are two maxims: "Survival is the primary need of civilization" and "Civilization continuously grows and expands, but the total matter in the universe remains constant", plus the related concepts of chains of suspicion and technology explosion.

The Dark Forest bristles with SF ideas while remixing the tropes of First Contact, Generation Starship and disaster tale but these elements sometimes sit uneasily with the stories of the humans involved. Its title's metaphor encapsulates a bleak explanation for the Fermi Paradox.

Both these novels contain footnotes, mostly to explain specifically Chinese references. Footnotes can be a delight but SF readers are used to neologisms – sometimes unexplained. Their necessity in either book is therefore arguable – and in the cases of Kuiper Belt, Oort Cloud, tokamaks, the strong nuclear interaction and Lagrange point, surely superfluous.

However, together they both suggest Chinese SF has been neglected in the wider world for far too long.

The final book of the trilogy, *Death's End*, is published in April 2016.

THE BONE CLOCKS
David Mitchell
Sceptre hb, 608pp, £20.00

SLADE HOUSE
David Mitchell
Sceptre hb, 240pp, £12.99

Ian Sales

Despite being shortlisted twice for the Booker Prize, David Mitchell's novels are not like most other literary fiction novels for two reasons: first, characters from one book often appear in other books; and secondly, many of his novels feature genre tropes

and situations. In his debut, *Ghostwritten* (1999), one of the narrators proves to be a spirit who can move from body to body. *Cloud Atlas* (2004) has two of its six sections set in the future: one a near-future dystopian Korea, the other a post-apocalyptic Hawaii. While it's not unusual for literary fiction authors to visit genre shores, Mitchell has shown a greater appreciation of, and a better facility with, genre tropes than most of his peers. But then he is a fan and has publicly said as much. And in *The Bone Clocks*, and its pendant novel *Slade House*, he has for the first time told an actual genre story, albeit in the language of literary fiction.

The Bone Clocks is structured as six novellas, most of which are told from the point of view of Holly Sykes. The novel opens in 1984, Holly is a teenager, grief-stricken at the recent death of her younger brother. She decides to run away from home, and makes it halfway across Kent before running afoul of the story's villains. These villains harken back to earlier novels by Mitchell, particularly *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet* (2010). That novel introduced the idea of secret immortals amongst us, and it is a war between two such groups which forms the backbone of *The Bone Clocks*. (You wait for a novel about secret immortals and three come along at once: as well as *The Bone Clocks*, 2014 also saw the publication of Claire North's *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*, while Kate Atkinson's *Life After Life* appeared in 2013.) The Horologists are body-hopping serial reincarnators. Their enemies, however, the Anchorites of the Chapel of the Dusk of the Blind Cathar, "decant" souls in order to extend their lives. The process is fatal to the decanted souls. Over the course of *The Bone*

Clocks Holly has a number of run-ins with the Anchorites, beginning with that trip across Kent as a fifteen-year-old, and finishing in a post-Crash Ireland in 2043.

Unlike *Cloud Atlas*, the six sections of *The Bone Clocks* are not nested, but follow on chronologically one from the other. Like that earlier novel, however, they also display an excellent control of voice. *The Bone Clocks* is Holly Sykes's story and she's an engaging and convincing character. Having said that, the Anchorites are a bit pantomime; enfant terrible literateur Crispin Hershey initially reads too much like a pastiche of a well-known UK author but soon rounds out, and the immortal Marinus never quite convinces. But these are minor gripes. *The Bone Clocks* handles its settings with impressive assurance and, more than any other of Mitchell's novels, this is an insightful book.

Mitchell has said he intended each section of the novel to be a different genre – such as 1980s social realism, war reportage, fantasy and dystopia, among others. It's a given most of the really interesting genre fiction is being written in the area where genres meet, and Mitchell makes good use of the interfaces – the sudden irruption of fantasy into Holly's adventures in Thatcherite Britain create a shockingly effective introduction of *The Bone Clocks*' underlying fantastical plot. In fact, those sections featuring this violent introduction of genre into literary fiction actually work better than those sections which are pure genre. Perhaps it's a consequence of expectation; perhaps it's simply the stark contrast between the two modes.

Slade House, on the other hand, makes no secret of its melding of genre and non-genre, although it tries to wrong-foot the reader by presenting its genre elements as "dream-like". If the novel were a film or television series, it would be called a "spin-off". Less than half the size of *The Bone Clocks*, *Slade House* echoes that novel's multi-part structure – each set at nine-year intervals from 1979 to 2015 – but takes place entirely in and around the eponymous residence. Each section is told from the point of view of a different person. The eponymous house is home to Norah and Jonah Grayer who, while not associated with *The Bone Clocks*' Anchorites, have been using a similar method to extend their lives. *Slade House*'s narrators are the pair's victims.

In each section, the narrator investigates Slade Alley (for a variety of reasons), discovers a small iron door – an inter-dimensional "Aperture" – which gives entry to Slade House's grounds, is initially taken in by the illusion woven by the Grayer twins…and is then consumed by them. This act is usually presaged by the sight of a portrait of the narrator at the end of a line of portraits on the main staircase – which is, to be honest, a somewhat cheesy horror film cliché. *Slade House* presents enough detail to invoke the year in which each section is set, but given that Slade House itself is timeless, this makes for an odd disconnect, often making the detail feel superfluous. Nor is it helped by the last but one section – 2006 – consisting chiefly of a history lesson of Norah and Jonah Grayer, and an explanation of the workings of the house and its grounds. It comes as no surprise to learn that the final section, set in 2015, is about the defeat of the Grayer twins – after the explanation, where else could the narrative go?

Fans of Mitchell's fiction will have fun spotting characters from other of his novels, a number of which make an appearance in *Slade House* (as indeed several do in *The Bone Clocks*). I've yet to be convinced this actually adds value, given that the "shared universe" in which all of Mitchell's novels are set is not a shared universe as the term is understood in genre fiction, but a much less rigorous use of the technique. In other words, they feel more like "Easter eggs" than a structural part of each book's universe.

Unlike some genre fans, I have no problems with literary fiction authors "dabbling" (not my choice of word) in science fiction and fantasy. On the contrary, the more the merrier – and the lack of knowledge of genre traditions and history can actually prove an advantage to a writer. True, the results often feel a little old-fashioned to veteran readers of genre fiction, and a lack of confidence in deploying genre tropes can lead to unnecessary and clumsy exposition… David Mitchell, however, *is* a genre fan, he knows what he's doing. And it shows.

Mitchell also knows what he's doing when it comes to non-genre fiction. Genre writers make few concessions to their readers – they assume they know how to parse their stories and how genre tropes operate. They also trust their readers to understand the need for exposition. But there's a limit. Up to *this point*, the writer needs to explain; and no further. Literary writers usually miscalculate this point and feel a need to explain those things which genre readers either already know about or are happy to take on trust. Likely this is because they are they not entirely confident with how genre stories and tropes work, and they're also unsure their readers will understand.

It's clear Mitchell trusts his readers, both non-genre and genre – evident not only from his oeuvre, but also from his level of success. We need more writers like him. Both inside and outside the genre.

THE HOUSE OF SHATTERED WINGS
Aliette de Bodard
Gollancz pb, 416pp, £14.99

Paul Kincaid

The Great War became known as the First World War not just because it was fought on battlefields from Africa to the Near East, but because the European Powers drew on their imperial possessions around the globe for cannon fodder, although they received little in the way of official recognition or appreciation. When, after the war, French officials toured the battlefield of Verdun to find the body that would occupy their Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, they very deliberately confined their search to those sectors where they knew no Jewish or black soldiers had been engaged.

Something of that underpins the most interesting portions of Aliette de Bodard's novel, though it too often gets swamped by a far more conventional fantasy narrative.

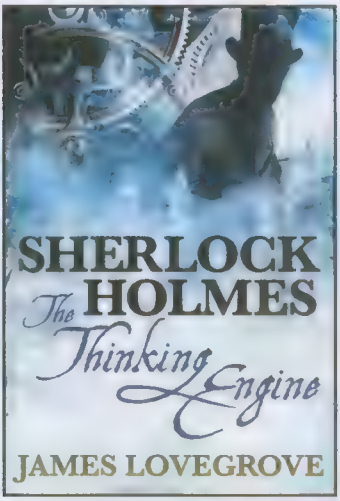
Here the Great War has been transfigured into the Great Houses War, a magical struggle between the feudal establishments that rule this alternative Paris. It is impossible to tell from the novel how extensive the war was, since we never see beyond the confines of the city or even much beyond the Ile de la Cité, but the effect is the same, a remembered Golden Age of privilege and wealth has been replaced with depression and ruin. This vision of Paris, with a sluggish Seine hopelessly polluted by the effluvia of magic, is an intriguing creation, so much so that I could have wished that the focus pulled away from Notre Dame to see more of it.

This is a world in which local belief systems have been conquered and banished by the colonising power of Christianity, which takes the form of fallen angels who seem to be cast out of Heaven in such numbers and with such alarming regularity that one must wonder how many can be left in God's retinue. Curiously, given that the Fallen represent concrete evidence of the existence of heaven, practically all of the mortals we meet in this novel seem to have lost their faith. Curiously also, it is reported that mortals who die may go to heaven or to hell; yet the first of the Fallen, Morningstar, is early shown to be Lucifer, and since he has here come to Earth, what hell is there for the dead to go to?

Throughout the novel there is an unresolved ambiguity about the nature of the Fallen. When Morningstar is the great lost hero, how can the book be anything but ambiguous? Both sides in the over-familiar battle of the magicians that is at the core of the book are cruel and duplicitous. The two Fallen whose development we watch, Isabelle the newly-fallen ingénue and Selene, who is Morningstar's successor as head of House Silverspires, both become harder and more ruthless as they grow to take on the heroic role of winning the day.

In the midst of all this is Philippe, once a mortal in Annam or Indochina. He became an immortal in the service of the Jade King then was exiled for reasons we never discover, only to be conscripted into the Great Houses War. Now he is trapped in post-war Paris, unable to get away and with no home to return to. His resentment of all of the Houses, though it sometimes seems little more than petulance, is the most powerful and most original driver of the novel. He is taken by House Silverspires, who hold him captive, though for all their powers the Fallen never seem to realise he is immortal (which we are told every time he appears) or to understand the different magic he can command. If we are meant to assume that his racial difference means he does not merit such close attention, this is never made clear. Instead, through his quest to get away, he becomes the vehicle through which an ancient curse is unleashed upon Silverspires.

As a soldier of the Great War, abandoned by the powerful for whom he fought and suffered, Philippe is the engine that drives the plot, and his story is far and away the most interesting thing in the novel. Unfortunately, he is not the focus of the novel. That focus shifts between Isabelle, Selene, and Madeleine, alchemist and addict, who are all tied to Silverspires, so that for too much of the novel we are cheering on their dramatic defence of the House as it comes under multiple magical attacks. Madeleine is, with Philippe, one of the more interesting characters, and the role of the Fallen adds a certain novelty, but this is essentially an overlong account of dueling magicians. *The House of Shattered Wings* is an entertaining fantasy, but it would have been a shorter and better book if it had concentrated more on the position Philippe occupies within this city.



SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE THINKING ENGINE
James Lovegrove
Titan Books pb, 304pp, £7.99

Jack Deighton

After *The Stuff of Nightmares* and *Gods of War*, this is the third of Lovegrove's Sherlock Holmes novels for Titan Books. The foreword here, supposedly written in 1927 by a retired Dr Watson, places *The Thinking Engine* in the interstices of the Holmes stories published in *The Strand*. Books which extend a franchise potentially have to satisfy more than one constituency: devotees of the originals, those of passing acquaintance, the possibility of attracting new adherents. Devotees are catered for here by frequent mentions of previous Holmes cases, a couple of diversions on how often Holmes used the word "elementary", sly references to inconsistencies in the canon, several citings of the Reichenbach Falls and an evocation of the Great Grimpen Mire.

The premise of *The Thinking Engine* promises a foray into alternative history, a speculative slant to the proceedings, a steampunk ambiance. A certain Balliol professor, Malcolm Quantock, has constructed the Engine of the title, said to be able to solve crimes merely by providing it with all the data required, and newspaper proprietor Lord Knaresfield has offered a prize to anyone who can disprove its accuracy. How can this fail to interest the Great Detective?

The Engine's first case is that of the murder of a mother and daughters for which the prime suspect, the husband and father, has an apparently cast-iron alibi. Holmes, given access to the crime scene by an unusually helpful policeman, solves it in short order. So too does the Thinking Engine, a device of whirring rotors and tickertape print-outs (it later gains a voice based on phonographic disc recordings). We have to wait a while for this encounter, though, as in the early chapters we are introduced to a pre-fame Harry Houdini, animating the mummy of an Egyptian pharaoh in order to drum up business for an exhibition of antiquities. Such unlikely meetings with the famous in perhaps unfamiliar roles are one of the small pleasures of alternative history, but here there are few other instances. We are told Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (aka Lewis Carroll) consults the Thinking Engine on a mathematics problem and appears crushed by its evidently correct solution. Later, Home Secretary H.H. Asquith and the London Police Commissioner visit to assess the Engine's suitability to aid in the wider aspects of law enforcement.

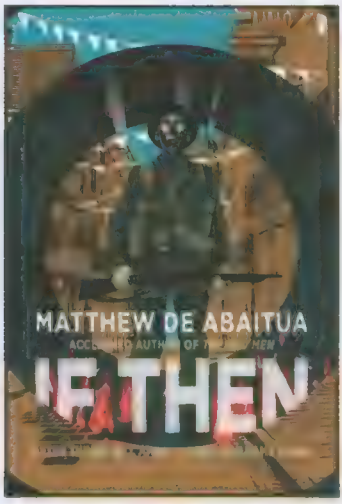
The Engine's second case at first seems more trivial. Student Aubrey Bancroft sends poison pen letters to his tutor but is easily unmasked. This affair takes on more sinister attributes when Bancroft is himself poisoned by strychnine contained in a celebratory bottle of champagne. Another apparent piece of nonsense about the crew kidnapping and replacing the arrogant stroke of a rowing VIII ends in the murder of the ringleader. In both of these Watson is conscience-struck by being unable to save the lives of the victims despite being in attendance.

Holmes's repeated failures to rebut the Engine delight reporter Archie Slater, who takes great pleasure in lambasting him in print. Yet all the cases bear the hallmarks of the perpetrators being manipulated into their acts. A greater intelligence is at work.

Unlike SF, it is the duty of the detective story, of the detective, to restore order to an errant world. Holmes, naturally, does so, but not before exposing himself to danger and humiliation.

Notwithstanding occasional Americanisms such as "it's down to me", "fit" used as a past tense and instances of possibly un-Watsonian usage like "Oh pish! Think nothing of it", plus the surely modern "You reckon you've cracked it?", it's all very cleverly done and devotees will (I assume) be pleased enough, but lovers of speculative fiction may be less enthralled. The story sticks closely to the Holmesian template, remaining firmly down to earth. Far from being an advance on Babbage's Analytical Engine, the workings of the Thinking Engine are foreshadowed by the business with the mummy, and resolutely quotidian. Its closest comparator (spoiler!) is a historical machine known as the Mechanical Turk, which Lovegrove himself acknowledges in the text. After this, the revelation of the villain of the piece does not come as too great a surprise.

There are neat authorial touches such as Quantock's allusion to "paths laid out before me, following the lead of others", and Watson's statement that "It is possible to have refined tastes and peddle dross", but this book is one mainly for Holmes aficionados.



IF THEN
Matthew de Abaitua
Angry Robot pb, 416pp, £8.99

Stephen Theaker

James is the bailiff of Lewes. When the Process decides that people – a village, a family, a child – must be removed, he cannot resist for long the urge to put on the armour and abandon himself to it, stomping around the countryside, scooping up those who refuse exile. He tries the peaceful approach first, popping round for a chat to see if they will leave freely, but of course even then he wears personal body armour in case of ambush.

Taking this job was the price of being allowed into Lewes after the economy collapsed and everyone became unemployed, destitute, desperate and homeless. Ruth, James's wife, worked in a library in Hackney in the run-up to the great Seizure, and as other public institutions closed she saw it become the final destination of hundreds of people with nowhere else to go for help – and then there was nowhere at all.

Now that Ruth and James, and about ten thousand others, are a part of the Process, she works as a seamstress in the evenings and a schoolteacher in the day. The other people in town, all of them bearing the telltale data stripe from their crowns to their necks, fear her, because of her husband, believing that the Process will want to keep him happy, and thus will keep his wife happy. They also pity her: he's not quite the man he used to be.

This relationship, which has already survived so much, faces a new crisis when the name Agnes appears on the eviction list. No one is surprised to see drunks, criminals and other undesirables on the list, though their families may fight tooth and nail to prevent their eviction, but Agnes is a child, one of Ruth's pupils. "If you evict Agnes," she says, "it will be difficult for me to love you." James wonders, "Are we evil? Is this what evil looks like?"

The Process does have a benevolent side. On allocation day everyone, from Lewes and the nearby estates and villages, comes to the old supermarket, where "peeling posters showed bleached photographs of bygone normality, goods and prices, smiling faces, times of plenty, the strangeness of the lost everyday". Now the shelves are filled by transparent boxes, containing the goods allocated to each person by the Process, sometimes even scraps of advice.

The strangeness of this life, this peculiar society, and the pressure it puts on this couple and everybody else, would be interesting enough in itself – this part is called *If* – but where a science fiction novel of the sixties or seventies might have stopped, this book takes a new direction: *Then*. The Process isn't simply concerned with its participants' wellbeing, it's not something that happens to them: they are a part of it, and of each other, and it's drawing them further in.

At the book's beginning James finds Hector, a new-made soldier, hanging from barbed wire, "not quite a man", a creation of the Process. His wounds reveal "spokes of tightly-packed crimson seeds like a pomegranate". He wears a khaki tunic, puttees, hob-nailed boots, woollen trousers and an overcoat; a life-size World War I toy soldier. James takes him to the Institute, an addled group of scientists on the fringe of the Process, mutated by their own experiments.

But Hector is only the beginning. Later come rifles, shells, cannons, "miles of barbed wire, legions of horse", and, as the need for production overtakes capacity, men "with greatcoats fused to their skin and no feet in their boots", until at last the humans of the Process themselves are co-opted into a phoney war, their memories muddled, their behaviour reshaped like the landscape, so that they fight and die in a replica of the coastline of Gallipoli.

This is a powerful novel, both in its portrayal of the horrors of World War I, the wasteful loss of life, the dreadful conditions, the failures of those who let the war happen, and also in showing how easily the systems that support our modern-day lives could fall apart. And of course the book is all about the correlations between the two, about what happens when people get to experiment or play war games with the mass of human life, when we are treated as an expendable resource.

When Ruth enters the war in search of James, she meets a replica of Noel Huxley. "Every day is strange, threatening and uncertain," she says of the future. "We are not in control of our lives." To which Huxley replies, "That is a description of the soldier's life." The book suggests how much of ourselves we'd give up for a quiet life, and it's hard to argue with its conclusions.

LUNA: NEW MOON
Ian McDonald
Gollancz tpb, 382pp, £16.99

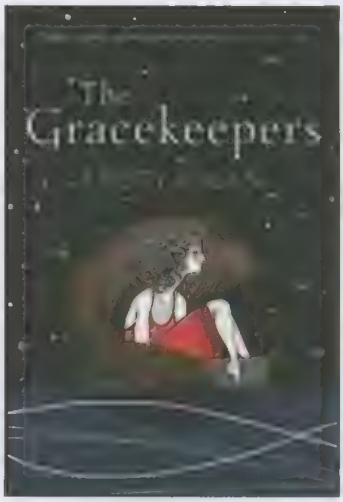
Maureen Kincaid Speller

The publicity surrounding *Luna* would have us read it as a gritty species of space opera: *The Godfather* on the Moon. Ian McDonald is already known for taking others' ideas and pushing them in new directions, as if to see just how far they can be made to go. In that case, why not take stories from other genres and do the same? The question is what, if anything, does this sidelong *homage* bring to the main story? Do we accept it as a literary shorthand to get us beyond the corporate wars of something like Ben Bova's Grand Tour novels and into a new, more intricately corrupt world? McDonald is quite clear that the battle for the Moon and its resources will be ugly, and a million miles from the utopian cooperation beloved of a certain kind of SF novel. Or should we simply regard it as an opportunity to experience gang wars in space? And if this latter, is there really any point?

McDonald's Moon is run, inevitably, by five clans, the Five Dragons, under the impotently watchful eye of the Eagle of the Moon (a nod perhaps to the original explorers of the Moon). The peace between them is uneasy, maintained by an elaborate series of dynastic and, unsurprisingly, mostly loveless marriages. Business is all, and everything, including friends and family, is liable to be sacrificed to that. Of the five families, Corta Hélio, headed by the formidable eighty-year-old Adriana Corto, is the brash young kid on the block. Corta's ambition lifted her out of poverty in Brazil, where she spotted a business chance and turned it to her advantage. AKA, Mackenzie Metals, VTO and Taiyang have only grudgingly admitted Corta Hélio to their ranks, and only because it is so powerful they can't afford not to. Lunar high society, reluctantly tight-knit as it is, seems also to be riddled with secret groups, hoping to leverage things to their own advantage. And around them the beautiful people, for whom money is no object, meet and party, while out of sight the workers get on with making more money for them, while paying for the Four Elementals that keep them going: air, water, carbon and data.

McDonald employs the montage technique that has served him well in the past – one thinks inevitably of *Desolation Road* – but while we may jump from Adriana, contemplating her death and seeking solace in the religious beliefs of her past, to Lucasinho, youngest male scion of the clan, on the run from his repressive father, to Marina Calzaghe, saviour of Rafael Corta after an attempt on his life, to Ariel, the brittle lawyer, only daughter of the clan, none of this seems to move the novel forward significantly. The more interesting parts of the narrative dwell in the glimpses of those elements of family life that are avoided in polite conversation, and which are of course precisely those places the reader wants to go.

We are also directed to admire the staggering diversity of nationalities and beliefs which intermingle and form lunar society, not to mention the ever-so-slightly too casual presentation of same-sex relationships, as well as bisexual and gender-neutral characters, but the fact of their being so very front and centre in the novel suggests discomfort rather than casual acceptance of them as the norm. In truth, it's difficult to find a reason to care about the Corta children and their business, perhaps because rich people being rich, and worrying about remaining rich, just aren't that interesting. Adriana's autobiography, her final confession to Irma Loa, a Sister of the Lords of Now, is the meatiest, and maybe most traditional part of the story, but it's not enough to sustain the novel. We might wonder about Lucasinho's charming but incomprehensible interest in baking cakes, or be drawn, as Marina is, to the discovery of the perpetual run taking place in the tunnels of João de Deus, as much a spiritual as a physical exercise. We certainly crave to know more about Wagner, the moonwolf, the Corta outsider. All these are elements of the Ian McDonald whose work I love for its verve and daring, but they remain underexplored, somehow constrained by the form and setting that he's chosen for this novel. Adam Roberts noted that *Luna* has much in common with the soap opera *Dallas*, and this is true, but I think also of *The Great Gatsby*, and of Tom and Daisy Buchanan: "careless people … they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back to their money or their vast carelessness … and let other people clear up the mess they had made". They have much in common with most of the Corta family.



THE GRACEKEEPERS
Kirsty Logan
Harvill Secker hb, 304pp, £18.99

Ian Hunter

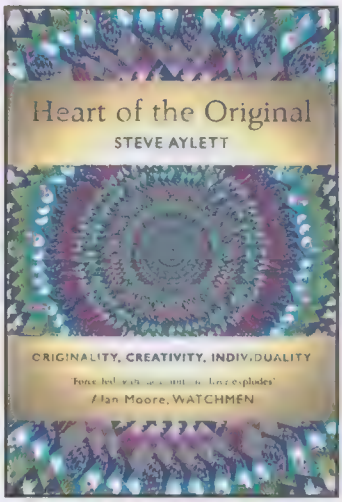
Sp ooky or what? I am standing in the main book tent, in a signing queue at this year's Edinburgh Book Festival, with copies of novels by Emily St. John Mandel in my hand when someone calls my name, and it's fellow *Interzone* reviewer Elaine Gallagher at the festival to hear Kirsty Logan and Marina Warner talking about "Gods and Monsters: What Are the Modern Myths?". Even more spooky, perhaps, is the fact that Logan has written a novel set in a far-off dystopian future complete with a travelling circus albeit that the circus travels on a water that almost completely covers the world; while in my hand was a copy of Mandel's *Station Eleven* set in a future where the "Georgia Flu" has decimated humanity and even worse, the oil has run out. Oh, and Mandel's novel follows a group of actors and musicians as they perform Shakespeare around the Great Lakes. Dystopian future. Lots of water. Travelling performers. Like I say, spooky, or what? There the resemblance between the two novels probably ends, and while Mandel's novel is probably the better known, winner of the Clarke award, and highly praised by George R.R. Martin, no less, Logan's novel has a quote by Ursula K. Le Guin on the front and back covers and the only way is up as I already know how good Logan is having seen her and heard her read from her short story collection *The Rental Heart and Other Fairy Tales* at last year's Edinburgh Book Festival.

In many ways *The Gracekeepers* is a novel-length fairy tale, given the memorable characters – some of which have names from the past like Jarrow and Whitby and Avalon – the situation, and the occasional jolting, jarring shocks that emerge from the gentle dream-like narrative flow like the jagged teeth of rocks protruding from the depths that a boat might run aground on. The world has changed, everything has changed, there is water almost everywhere, and dead cities lie below the surface, still visible in places, like a dream, or a warning. There is still some land to live on, and you can become a "clam" or "landlocker" as they are called, if you are rich enough to afford it. If not, you will live and die on the seemingly endless seas, though some yearn and dream of a different future on the land, but for very different reasons. Callanish lives on the land, if you can call where she lives "land", and she is alone on a man-made island visited only by those who would leave her supplies and those who want her to perform a death ritual, because she is a Gracekeeper of the title, one who performs the funeral rites for those who die at sea. These rites involve the allocation of a caged bird – a grace – which has been bred to spend its last few days caged without food and water and when it dies the mourning period for the person who died is over.

Callanish yearns for her mother, yearns to fish, but dares not, believing the sea that surrounds her is polluted by the rotting bodies she has helped dispatch. The other major character is North, one of the travelling folk, or the "damplings" as they are known, living on the floating circus that consists of a convey of different crafts that make up "Excalibur" which visits the islands to entertain. North has a performing bear which sets her apart, and she would like to be apart from the rest of them, hating the Ringmaster's wife, Avalon, and hating the plans of the ringmaster, sometimes known as Jarrow and sometimes known as Red Gold, and the expectations she will marry his son, even though neither of them want this.

North and Callanish have encountered each other briefly, right at the start of the novel, but were too young to remember it, as other, darker events, dominated the proceedings, but now a storm is coming and they will meet again.

Lyrical, poetic, reminding me of Le Guin, of the Arabat books of Clive Barker (must be all that water), Angela Carter too, maybe even Christopher Priest (must be all those islands), and possibly even China Miéville's *Railsea*, but instead of big powerful trains we have powerful boats, full of powerful people making up their own rules as they sail along and woe betide anyone who gets in their way. However, most of all, with its slightly distancing text in places *The Gracekeepers* reminds me of the works of Gene Wolfe which can be no bad thing. I remember reading that David Bowie's *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* was his blueprint to stardom; *The Gracekeepers* could very well be Kirsty Logan's own blueprint. Watch this space.



HEART OF THE ORIGINAL
Steve Aylett
Unbound hb, 144pp, £8.99

Andy Hedgecock

In the mid-1980s, as a young chap with an unimpressive vocabulary, I came across an article in which the critic Jonathan Meades discussed a writer's tendency towards "hip euphuism". I'm pretty sure Meades achieved his intention when I went scurrying for a dictionary to discover it meant mannered, ornate and sophisticated. I enjoyed the neatly worked literary paradox, but the strange loop in which a hip euphuist's discussion of a hip euphuist left me thrashing around for meaning and feeling a bit thick and excluded. Never mind, I thought, in thirty years or so the phrase "hip euphuism" might come in very handy.

Which brings me to the hip euphuism of Steve Aylett's first nonfiction book, *Heart of the Original*. It's impressive in its ambition, painstaking in its construction, and hugely impressive in terms of its linguistic pyrotechnics. But it requires a supreme effort from its readers in terms of focus and application. Originality is, as Aylett tells us repeatedly, using a range of metaphors, examples and stylistic flourishes, a demanding aspiration, and this celebration of originality and genuine imagination is a mightily demanding read.

Aylett's encomiasts include Michael Moorcock and Alan Moore: Moore sees the book as a manifesto for integrity and against the dominant culture of recycling in multiplexes and bookstores. His thesis is that we inhabit a culture so afraid of the genuinely original we take pains to pass it off as hackneyed. And, he argues, to achieve this we apply the hypnotic language of cultural conservatism, language that 'reframes' the innovative as recycled. We shunt the new into the past with phrases such as 'It's a cliché that…' At the same time, he observes, we dress up the endlessly recycled in the uniform of faux rebelliousness: a safety valve for a society mired in the safe, the commercial and the corporate is provided by "standard-issue boil-in-the-bag wackiness such as spikey pink hair".

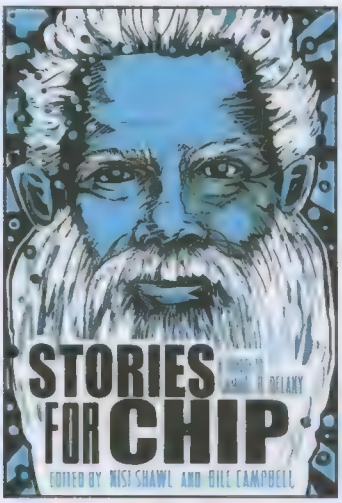
What the author celebrates is the under-celebrated risk taker – Charles H. Hinton, Flann O'Brien, Giorgio de Chirico. And then there's Mikhail Bulgakov's masterpiece, *The Master and Margarita*. For Aylett, the originality of Bulgakov stems from his melding of two narratives to create a 'deeply strange' and unsettling third space, a mysterious emergent property of the collision between his texts that prods the reader towards serious and focussed reflection. But to what end? Aylett offers no prescriptions, his role isn't to shepherd his readers through a catalogue of books to read before they die. Instead, *The Heart of the Original* has the courage of its convictions and demands originality from the reader as well as the author. Aylett provides the highly coloured, finely detailed pieces of the jigsaw. Your job is to assemble the fragments into a coherent picture.

In a chapter entitled 'The Stitch-Up' Aylett engages in a spot of literary archaeology and examines the tendency to commend 'refined' texts at the expense of books in which the raw idea emerged, bleeding and tender. Paul Sheerbat's *Lesabedio* tackled interdimensional experience and transformation before Kubrick, Bester, Rucker – and even Italo Calvino – got there. Aylett goes on to highlight the way society treats those who dare to strive for innovation – Bulgakov, Jan Potocki and Boris Vian all paid a considerable price for their commitment to true originality.

At its most enthralling Aylett's prose is crammed with epigrammatic observation and toxic wit. Who can argue with his declaration that "crime is the only remaining way of making money commensurate with one's efforts"? And it's hard not to smile – and nod in agreement – at the assertion that Hans Christian Andersen was "a creepy writer whose potential readers have been kept at bay for decades by Danny Kaye's stupid face."

At its most infuriating, his prose is obscure, meretricious and downright clumsy: "I hope the bloodbuzz of accelerating vision blurs you into the seraphim blast of reasonable assumption, producing high hours amid the blaze." This is the problem with this book: every page is informed by the author's assumption, perhaps implicit, that originality is synonymous with the elaborate, abstruse and difficult. Many of the books he celebrates are as accessible as they are provocative – consider *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, *Moominvalley in November* and Moorcock's Second Ether novels.

Having made this point, there's much to admire. In essence, *Heart of the Original* is a diatribe against the deadening certainties of our culture, an antidote to the cult of the 'reimagined' and a celebration of art's potential to reshape our perceptions and our actions.



STORIES FOR CHIP: A TRIBUTE TO SAMUEL R. DELANY
Edited by Nisi Shawl & Bill Campbell
Rosarium Publishing tpb, 390pp, $19.99

Jim Steel

Crowdfunding? It's nothing new, no matter how the naysayers may disparage it. In volumes from centuries past it was not unusual to find lists of subscribers appended. Publishers have always been adept at finding ways of bringing books to you. Given Delany's position on best-seller lists, one can assume that Rosarium's angle of attack stems from a desire to produce the finest book possible rather than any misgivings of a commercial nature. Perhaps the most conventional thing in here is Kim Stanley Robinson's introduction. After that, all gloves are off.

Given that he operates in a genre that habitually eulogises grey mediocrities and places them in the pantheon, Delany's position as an openly gay African American writer would be sufficient to make him noteworthy. This is still a very conservative genre and, unfortunately, one does not have to use much imagination to picture the circumstances that prevailed at the start of his career in the early sixties. However, Delany is also one of our few stone-cold geniuses – the bridge between the beats and the punks – and he is responsible, to a large extent, for dragging our literature out of its adolescence. Can one discuss Delany without touching on sexuality or race? Yes, of course – there are many aspects to what is, by now, a very large body of work. A holistic approach is necessary for a complete appreciation, though, and it is not possible (nor should it be) to produce this anthology without referencing them. Isiah Lavender III's essay on race and science fiction boils with a righteous anger concerning his own direct experience of racism and white privilege in academic circles. And his experiences are not all that old. Incidentally, Lavender also provides an informed reading list that would be suitable for newcomers to Delany.

L. Timmel Duchamp, in one of the highlights of the anthology, explores Delany's identity as a SF writer and his appropriation by other literary movements, while at the same time spotlighting his championing of the feminist cause. Michael Swanwick tackles a single novel, *The Einstein Intersection* (and he also turns up as a fictional character with Delany in Eileen Gunn's road trip story). Tom Disch's piece blurs the reality of an essay, on reminiscences of writers, with his poet's eye. Disch's piece is, of course, a reprint, as are maybe a third of the pieces in here (including Roz Clarke's excellent 'Haunt-type Experience' from our fellow traveller *Black Static*). Most, it is fair to say, come from far-scattered sources and are unfamiliar to the general reader (ie me).

If the nonfiction is vital then the fiction is a delight. Many of our finest writers are showcased here, proud to pay tribute to Delany. Sensibly everyone avoids the temptation for pastiche and if the fiction were to have been published in plain covers then the theme of the anthology might have been obscured. This, in itself, is merely a reflection on Delany's range. Hal Duncan's wordplay in 'An Idyll in Erehwyna' skirts closest to Delany, but anyone familiar with Duncan's work will already be aware of his love of the master. Fábio Fernades' 'Eleven Stations', weirdly, reads almost like a pastiche of Duncan. Kit Reed's 'Kick-enders' has, cheekily, a crowd-funded hitman (or not-hitman) as a solution to workplace harassment. Ellen Kushner's 'When Two Swordsmen Meet' reminds us, if we need it, that Delany fixed sword & sorcery in his Nevèrÿon stories. Kathryn Cramer, Nalo Hopkinson & Nisi Shawl, Ernest Hogan, and Nick Harkaway all produce the goods, with Harkaway throwing a bit of Burroughs into the mix as well in his bizarre Western 'Billy Tumult'. Vincent Czyz, a writer from a literary tradition and probably unfamiliar to most SF readers, delivers small-town estrangement in 'Hamlet's Ghost Sighted in Frontenac, KS'. Geoff Ryman's 'Capitalism in the 22nd Century' has one of those delicious titles that demands attention, and he doesn't disappoint. To say that Ryman works better at novel length is merely to say that enough is never enough, and his story reminds us that we haven't seen a novel from him in almost a decade.

So what do we have here? If you don't like Delany then obviously you won't have read as far as this. And – seriously – what is wrong with you? If you haven't actually read much Delany then – and this is a rare thing indeed – this is a volume that you will still be able to enjoy. I highly recommend it. It is *that* good. But, I have to add, if you haven't read Delany yet, then…

MUTANT POPCORN

NICK LOWE

THE MARTIAN

THE LAST WITCH HUNTER

HITMAN: AGENT 47

THE BOY AND THE BEAST

FAN

HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA 2

THE LOBSTER

MAZE RUNNER: THE SCORCH TRIALS

CRIMSON PEAK

THE BRAND NEW TESTAMENT

Who knew? Who would have imagined even a year ago that there was an audience for a kind of sf cinema we thought had died with *Destination Moon*? – sf of a hardness it was always assumed had no place in the language of film where exposition is death, and cast in the form of a 1940s *Astounding* plot pitting one sketchy character's problem-solving intellect against a series of engineering problems, with no human relationships beyond those glimpsed in photo frames of characters outside the walls of the story, no trace of identity angst or familial guffing, no recourse to aliens or other wiffly transcendental woo, and infused through with a sunny expansionist optimism for the survival of the human spirit and body in the infinite lethality of space? And to rub in the salt, the source material fell from the sky out of literary nowhere, from an amateur

THE MARTIAN

novel that bypassed commercial filtration mechanisms to find its readers for itself, and yet went on to restore the fallen reputation of the man who three decades past had been the greatest living science-fiction filmmaker, while doing for the jinxed subject matter of the red planet what *Pirates of the Caribbean* did for the last great Hollywood death-kiss.

Inside the Hollywood bubble that is the film industry's groupthink Hab, the safe version of what went right with **THE MARTIAN** is that it's all down to the things that professional filmmakers are, some of the time, able to get right: Drew Goddard's unobtrusive deftness in adapting Andy Weir's novel faithfully but filmically, shaping Mark Watney's voice to an actorly persona, and tightening the curves of the story arc around the key narrative beats; Ridley Scott's depth of experience, particularly in his prolific post-Oscar second bloom, in finding the film in the script and the spectacle in the effects; even Matt Damon's pudgy charisma and his readiness to show the camera closeups of his sub-astronaut tummy rolls. There's probably a bit of truth in all this; the film feels lean and professional compared to the book, with its increasingly skippable techno-dumps and Clarkean characterisations, and it's with some amazement that you

realise at the end that you've just sat through a film with a longer running time than *2001* in which precisely three and a half things happen. (There's a storm. The Hab blows up. NASA falls foul of Feynman's warning that nature cannot be fooled. And there's a bit of dicey orbital mechanics, which is the half.) It's also possible to play hindsight with the high-concept premise: you're stuck on Mars, alone, for years or forever, and have to colonise the planet long-term on your own. But what nobody dares admit is that John W. Campbell might have been on to something, and your grandfather's sf might still be a more powerful kind of storytelling than anything that Hollywood thinks matters. Scott, to his great credit, has been undisguisedly enthusiastic about making a film that celebrates science, not just as an achievement of the human spirit, but as an engine of narrative joy. There's actually a whole genre of literature all about that, you know. If they put their minds to it, those clever film fellows could cinema the shit out of it.

There's been no such box-office love, sad to say, for **THE LAST WITCH HUNTER**, Vin Diesel's heartfelt attempt to produce himself a new franchise character against the day when his *Fast and Furious* career tank finally runs out of gas. Diesel is such a sweet, sincerely geeky advocate of unfashionable genre values that it's hard not to wish his more personal projects success, particularly after his tireless work making the last *Riddick* happen independently; and this new attempt has his signature mix of an overenthusiastically convoluted mythology sculpted around a character who can be played as a version of Vin Diesel. Here he's an 800-year-old enforcer in the service of a secret society dedicated to preserving the uneasy peace between humanity and the ancient reality-bending race we know as witches, only to find his loyalties put to the test when his mentor is taken out in what proves to be a conspiracy to resurrect the witch-queen who immortalised him in the first place, with only Elijah Wood and Rose Leslie left to stand with him against a new biological apocalypse. A lot of this is nearly fun, but there's an uneasy feeling that nobody but Vin actually cares, and that an 800-year-old genocide survivor still haunted by the ghosts of his youth and unable to connect emotionally with anyone but Michael Caine – whose performance consists principally of snoozing through the entire film – comes over as fairly indistinguishable from every other character he's ever played. The ending bids for franchise by promising bigger, badder, and more Lovecraftian things from the darkness than anything seen in this setter-upper; but as the queen of the witches warns us, "clay cannot be turned to gold", and I fear we've seen the last of this one.

Rupert Friend makes a more impressive fist of the challenge of playing a character with no personality in **HITMAN: AGENT 47**, the more science-fictionally minded sequel to the unremembered 2007 film of the long-running game series. Aside from writer Skip Woods, the team has been refreshed for this even sillier and bloodier followup, with Friend taking the character

much more seriously than the first film's smirkier Timothy Olyphant, and a plot teaming our barcode-necked hero (a meme originating with William Gibson, his one surviving contribution to *Alien*^{3}) with a similarly-enhanced girl clone – or Hit-Girl, if you will – whose female version of the programme has made her really good at being scared and hiding. "What if we could create a better man?" muses the opening exposition: "human beings without emotion or remorse?" And that then becomes Friend's acting challenge, to create an arc for a character defined by the absence of emotion. "I don't believe you can just turn off fear or love," our hero is told as he stunts it round Salzburg, Berlin, and Singapore like a bioenhanced Bond with an 18 certificate to kill, juicing, decapitating, and tossing people into turbines before getting injected with enhanced acting serum for the climax and taking a just vengeance, to surf-guitar western showdown music, on a villain who actually dares to use the line "You and I aren't so very different." In the meantime, Ciaran Hinds passes through with an encouraging message for any clones out there who are beset by doubts about their capacity for independent moral volition: "We determine who we are by what we do." Or maybe that was Sinatra.

Mamoru Hosoda's last film *Wolf Children* used the tropes and resources of anime to frame an almost unbearably affecting meditation on the passage of childhood, and he's back now with the more flamboyant and *shonen*-leaning **THE BOY AND THE BEAST** (whose title would be better translated *The Beast and his Boy*), about a tragically unmothered runaway who strays via a portal in Shibuya into an otherworld of *bakemono* beast-men, and finds a mentor and surrogate father in a comically dysfunctional bear-warrior who has as much to learn from him as the boy from the beast. But matters take a surprising new turn as the now-teenage hero finds the way back to our world, falls in with a sympathetic highschooler, and under her tutelage sets out to navigate the Japanese educational system and catch up on seven missed grades of Kanji, until a simmering crisis between the worlds brings an apocalyptic nemesis through the portal and the characters into a new and desperate alliance against the darkness. Like Hosoda's earlier films, it has a refreshing indifference to the overseas audience, feeding a dense network of baffling intracultural codes and images into a narrative engine fuelled by a flammable mix of barmy combat set pieces with winsome adolescent romance, and western viewers can easily miss entirely the big reveal about the mysteriously long-lived mouse sidekick that Japanese audiences pick up almost at once. But though there's a bit more of Hosoda's strangest film *Summer Wars* in the mix this time around, it shares with *The Girl Who Leaped through Time* and *Wolf Children* a sense of anime's power to talk about the central fact of adolescence that live-action film can never show: the slow, sweet, sad process of irreversible change and maturation over years and generations. If Hosoda

is the anointed new Miyazaki, this is his *Spirited Away* to *Wolf Children's My Neighbour Totoro*: huge, peculiarly shaped, and baroquely overcrowded with strange invention, but wonderful to its heart.

After this moving demonstration of anime's power to tell sensitive human stories about giant shadow whales smushing Tokyo, to turn to the season's other orphan fable **PAN** is a horrible plunge-bath in high-fructose Hollywood corn syrup. It's a mystery what possessed the normally discriminating Joe Wright to lend his name and talents to this wretchedly misbegotten retconathon, a pile of money lit under a bonfire of terrible ideas in the hope that they'll somehow catch light. "Based on characters introduced by J.M. Barrie", it not only casually unpicks Barrie's mythology to make Peter not the gay and innocent and heartless matrophobe who won't grow up, but a messianic scion of fairy royalty destined to fulfil the prophecy and let his people go, but exposes him as a teary mummy's boy who needs the ghost of a sparkly digital Amanda Seyfried to reassure him he's loved and special, and who greets her with "I have your eyes" – words which have never been spoken by son to mother in the whole history of human intercourse. The Lost Boys, meanwhile, are not lost but gleefully abducted from state care; Mr Smee is quite a lot more comedy-ethnotyped than you remember (it turns out to be short for Sam Smiegel, evidently Gollum's East End cousin), and most bizarrely James Hook is a roguish ill-written comrade in arms with two hands and an entirely unexplained name, whose transformation into the Hook we know from canon has been neverlanded off into a sequel we'll mercifully now never see. "The prophecy tells of a boy born of the love between a fairy prince and a girl not of this world", who is thumpingly named Mary; and Peter has to face his destiny and discover his powers of 3D flight by challenging public-domain pirate chief Blackbeard (obviously not the one from that other pirate franchise) over his genocidal plans to clear the native Neverlanders off their prime deposits of fairy dust. With the partial exception of game newcomer Levi Miller in the title role, everyone in it is the worst you've ever seen them in anything, though heaven knows they all give everything they've got to what little they've been given, which in poor Rooney Mara's case involves mostly sneaking sidelong smiles at Hooky to show she's inexplicably smitten by his insufferability. The one considerable thing to be said in its favour is that the fantasy visuals are often quite striking, until someone goes and opens their mouth. It's completely lacking in heart, and a bit more gay than anyone seems to have realised; but neither of those is at all what Barrie intended.

All this is strangely kin to another coming-of-age tale of a boy who can fly, released in the UK the same day, in **HOTEL TRANSYLVANIA 2**, where the franchise's new mixed-race sprog finds himself torn between his vampire heritage in grandpa Dracula's grand Bucharest hotel and his

mortal slacker birthright in far-off California. For this sequel Sony stalwart Adam Sandler, the voice of Drac, has intervened in script and story to turn the film into a blood relative of last issue's *The Cobbler*, in which ethnic heritage and ancestral tradition find themselves challenged by a changing world where identities are no longer made out of the old certainties, and the comedy is driven by culture clash between two worlds which have long since lost their fear of one another and the history of mutual atrocity that went with it. The old challenge of making a family film about scary monsters is sensibly addressed by openly thematising the fact that vampires, werewolves, mummies, and lab monsters are no longer scary, and that five-year-olds (the age by which little Denis is due to develop his bat-wings) think superheroes are cooler than vampires anyway; and if the plot rather runs out of things to do with the actual hotel, the character animation is often brilliant, and there's a good gag about the Invisible Man's imaginary girlfriend that deserved to be allowed to run longer than it does.

A rather different kind of comedy hotel for monsters opens its doors in Yorgos Lanthimos' bizarre deadpan fable **THE LOBSTER**, which presents us with a dystopian not-quite-Ireland in which singles get incarcerated in a grim resort hotel in County Kerry until they either hook up or fail, for which the sentence is to be surgically converted into an endangered animal of their choice. When Colin Farrell's wife deserts him for someone with a more attractive version of his sole defining trait (his presbyopia), he finds himself thrust back into the game, with fifty days to find a new partner or be sentenced to a crustacean future – only for a series of glumly comic mishaps to precipitate him down a new but no less fraught path as one of the outlaw singles the contestants hunt for sport. For the first hour you can't quite parse it, as a parade of unlikely stars on slow release – by the time the narrator appears, you'd forgotten she was in it – get introduced at spacious intervals as woeful losers identified only by their single identifiable character trait, with their acting turned down to fractionally above zero, and speaking dialogue that seems to have been written with the specific aim of being translated from the Greek and directed by someone who doesn't really understand what his actors are saying. And yet this film so unlike all others seems yet somehow hauntingly, insistently familiar, until some time in the second half the penny drops with an anvil thud and you realise it's *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, *Maze Runner*, and every other YA dystopian you've ever seen, but played straight by proper adult actors in all its absurdity. Everything's there: the insultingly stupid premise that everyone takes absolutely seriously; the minimalist characters reduced to a single defining characteristic; the ridiculously contrived coming-of-age ritual; the underwhelming sequel where the heroes escape the contained world of their ordeal to find that the world of the rebellion and resistance is no more free or fun than the world of their trials. All *The Lobster* needs to do is to cast a dozen brilliant adult performers in parts normally inhabited by teens, and the comedy writes itself.

I don't suggest for a moment that any of this was in its maker's mind, but it never needed to be. Sometimes parody just forms itself out of the inseminated froth of culture.

Certainly **MAZE RUNNER: THE SCORCH TRIALS** is a prime example of its kind, as Dylan O'Brien and chums escape from all that maze-running into an outside world which turns out to be only a larger and more metaphoric maze run by sinister gamesmasters Patricia Clarkson and Aidan Gillen, who have devised this improbably elaborate environment as a testing-ground for resistance to the apocalyptic Flare virus, but now find their teenage subjects posing a containment challenge of a different kind. In due course our heroes break out to quest across the wasteland of the Scorch to hook up with the rebel movement, who as ever in these post-apocalyptic resistances comprise a series of guest stars whose characters are known only by first names; whereupon the film recedes into a dull ghost memory of an eighties straight-to-video zombie picture. But those who've made it through James Dashner's novels knew this was where we were generally headed, and that this was always going to be one of those series that would struggle to sustain an audience after the higher-concept first instalment gave way to the more generic sequels, so it's been a smart move to keep the budgets low and the final volume unsplit. Readers will also know that the third book restores a significant cinematic asset from the opener that this film has managed to resist activating early, so there's something to look forward to other than just a final merciful escape from the labyrinth.

Having given up for now on the costlier *At the Mountains of Madness*, and with *Pacific Rim 2* still in stop-go-stop-again limbo, Guillermo del Toro has persuaded Universal to back his other longstanding pet project in ultragothic Hammer homage **CRIMSON PEAK**, which comes from the same period and co-writer (Matthew Robbins) as *Mountains*, but aims for a sweet spot between del Toro's bigger Hollywood fx spectaculars and his more admired low-budget Spanish ghost stories. Mia Wasikowska and Tom Hiddleston were paired as blood-loving siblings in *Only Lovers Left Alive*, but now it's Hiddleston and Jessica Chastain who are the sibs with secrets and Wasikowska the ingenue who falls into their clutches, as New World heiress and aspiring gothic novelist "Edith Cushing" finds herself courted by Hiddleston's old-world blueblood (but is it -beard?) and whisked away to his crumblingly vertical pile on the moors, where he seeks to build a machine that will excavate the deep red clay from beneath his ancestral lands. But from the start the audience are in on hints that Edith is merely a pawn in a creepier game, and that her sensitivity to unquiet spirits is going to open up some darker basement levels to the story.

Del Toro is clearly having the time of his life, and the production design is top-to-bottom gorgeous, with a proud disdain throughout for any kind of subtlety or indirectness, and making the most of Hiddleston's eerie likeness to a young Peter Cushing in the absence of any notable chemistry

with Wasikowska – here effectively reprising her *Alice in Wonderland* character in a garishly yellower wig. What sinks it is the plot, which goes to all and only the places you expect it to go, without a single interesting twist or unforeseen revelation, and whose only big surprise is that all the things you're confidently expecting for the finale – a massing of Allerdale Hall's ghosts in vengeance, a protracted mano-a-mano between the surviving antagonists, and a grand finish with the Hall swallowed up by its crimson foundations – fail to materialise, in contrast to the preposterous final ghost who does.

Crimson Peak's expensively horrific ghosts are no match for the shoal of phantom fish singing Trenet's "La Mer" in one of the more characteristic scenes of Jaco van Dormael's theological comedy **THE BRAND NEW TESTAMENT**: only his third film since his 1991 debut *Toto the Hero*, and the last of them, 2009's multiverse-spanning non-linear sf *Mr. Nobody*, was the most expensive Belgian film ever made but tanked on an epic scale internationally, taking half a decade to get any kind of US release. Now, after an uncharacteristically snappy six years, his latest caps *Mr. Nobody*'s back-and-forth timelines and realities by exposing nothing less than the truth about God: a vile, petty, misanthropic tyrant who created grey, depressing Brussels in His own image, and lives now in a grimly doorless seventies-styled apartment where He terrorises His mousy wife Goddess and ten-year-old daughter Ea, and amuses Himself at humanity's expense by ensuring that toast lands jam-downwards and the other queue always moves faster. But Ea is in secret contact with rebel big brother JC, whom the film is careful to distinguish from homonymous Belgian philosopher Jean-Claude van Damme, and who rigs the washing machine so that she can enter her Father's creation and assemble a Testament of her own from a new sextet of apostles, having first texted everyone in the world with the dates of their deaths and thereby disrupted her appalling Dad's hold over humanity; and when God follows to try to reassert His control, He learns what it's like to be made flesh in a world designed for His vindictive pleasure.

Like van Dormael's other films, it's beautifully put together, with ideas and jokes exploding out of it in all directions and an infectious zest for the classically surreal, a wistful sense of (superbly directed) children and adolescents as the custodians of the world's least corrupted wisdom, and an impatience with conventional narrative forms; Ea's Testament is an anthology of six variously bizarre personal histories, which are woven into the dual plotlines of God's pursuit and humanity's collective exploration of the consequences of Ea's global thought-experiment. But unlike in *Mr. Nobody*, which was a brilliant film punctured by a weak ending, everything in this one converges on a resolution so perfect and sweet as to seem practically divine. From the almighty's Gilliamesque office to Catherine Deneuve's affair with an animatronic gorilla, it's a film that stands proudly alone and defiant on its own little planet. In your face, Mark Watney.

LASER FODDER
TONY LEE

THE DANCE OF REALITY

THE FLASH SEASON ONE

ARROW SEASON THREE

ICEMAN

INFINI

MAD MAX: FURY ROAD

TURBO KID

DARK MATTER SEASON ONE

HAVEN SEASON FIVE

METAL HURLANT RESURGENCE

TERMINATOR GENISYS

TECHNOTISE: EDIT & I

SHARKNADO 3: OH HELL NO!

EYES WITHOUT A FACE

SECONDS

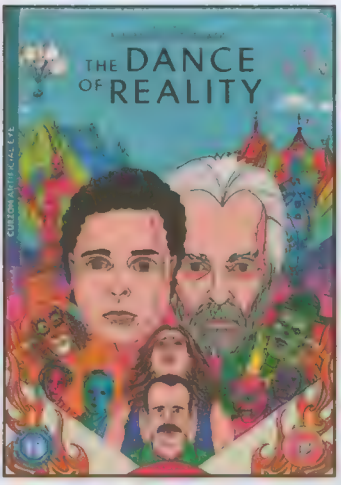
TOUR OF DUTY

ELIMINATION GAME

ALIEN STRAIN

SONG OF THE SEA

DOWNTIME



"Cinema shouldn't just be for amusement. Cinema should be an experience, right?" Acclaimed for mythic western *El Topo*, his bizarre mysticism in *Holy Mountain*, and circus horrors of *Sante Sangre*, Alejandro Jodorowsky is one of the greatest masters of the avant-garde in world cinema. **THE DANCE OF REALITY** (DVD/Blu-ray, 14 September), his first picture since *The Rainbow Thief* (1990), is an autobiographical drama with many fantasy aspects. It was made in secret, partly in his Chilean home town of Tocopilla, and released with a fanfare led by Nicolas Winding Refn at Cannes in 2013.

An artistically distorted story of Jodorowsky's own unhappy childhood, it stars the director's son Brontis playing Alejandro's father Jaime, a communist shopkeeper and staunch atheist (conflicts of faith are part of this surreal narrative's themes). The filmmaker's mother Sara (Pamela Flores) has strongly held beliefs but communicates only in operatic soprano and cleavage displays.

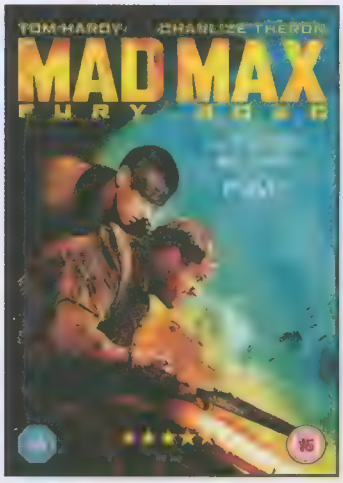
Right from the start, this is exceptionally unsettling on every

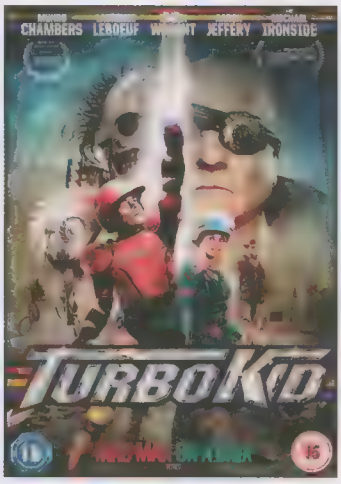
front, whether it's social, political, ethical, moralistic concerns or artistic creativity that's being called into question. A gathering of amputees are swept up by authorities and hauled away like human street trash. Clowns offer equal measures of menace and frivolity. Jewish boy Alejandro becomes the local firemen's mascot, while the director himself appears on-screen as a narrator portraying something like his own guardian angel. Jaime goes off to commit a political assassination but he fails to murder Chilean president Ibanez and, following other cruelly traumatic events that leave him with paralysed hands, the repentant Jaime finally returns home.

Shock values like nudity, peeing and torture appear in witty contrast against a pageant of psychological melodramas, visual poetry and slapstick farce. Behind the mask of logical objectivity that shrouds truth and frequently stifles philosophy, family history becomes weirdly compelling misadventure, peopled by shamanistic figures of somewhat gross perversity and metaphorical nomenclature. A sequel movie, *Endless Poetry*, about Jodorowsky's bohemian youth, is due next year.

While *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. Season Two* (DVD/Blu-ray, 19 October) continues its magical mystery tour of MCU backstory-land on their flying bus ride schedule with *X-Files* telefantasy/ *TV21* style colour supplement charm, Marvel's arch rival or supreme nemesis is not prepared to surrender any quickening dominion over broadcast media. "Not god. Grodd." DC superhero remake **THE FLASH SEASON ONE** (DVD/Blu-ray, 21 September) is a spin-off from *Arrow*, where CSI guy Barry Allen was struck by nuclear lightning and became "the fastest man alive", a ridiculously cheerful breakout performance by Grant Gustin. In a witty nod to Bilson and De Meo's 1990s TV series, former *Flash* star John Wesley Shipp here plays Barry's dad, wrongly imprisoned (so he's going nowhere, ha-ha) for murdering his wife. Amanda Pays also appears as Tina McGee, the doctor she played in the 1990s' *Flash*, while a further link to the past is Mark Hamill reprising his 'terrorist' Trickster, best villain from that original show.

Using story notes and exposition as terse dialogue certainly





saves time, so that action moves along swiftly and leaves most crime dramas standing still, but this show can't outpace its characteristic meta-man clichés and the basic serial set-up. As handy vehicle for introducing DC heroes, *Flash* clearly takes after *Smallville*, with more than its own share of soppy-opera stereotypes, including Barry's insipidly dull ex-girlfriend (talent-free Candice Patton). Support casting ticks all the main boxes of demographic appeal. Harrison Wells (Tom Cavanagh) mentors Barry's heroic streak at STAR Labs, but Wells' sneaky machinations add suspense. Chief techie Cisco talks in genrEnglish and tailors Barry's anti-friction suit so he becomes a burgundy blur while on patrol in Central City, and Dr Snow (Danielle Panabaker, *Time Lapse*) monitors Flash's speedy metabolism. Victor Garber (*Alias*) and genre regular Clancy Brown bring enthusiasm and presence, respectively, to their welcome guest-star roles.

Flash fights other super-humans and some enemies with weaponised gadgets: weather-man, multi-man, gas-man, bomber-girl, ice-man, metal-man, electric-man, clock-man, mad-man, fire-man, sound-man, teleport-girl, gilder-girl, bee-girl, shape-shifter guy, etc. Yellow Flash is a tachyon-powered menace, and a battle of speedsters leads to stinging defeat. By the time a nuke goes off and people are coming back from the dead we're into the time-travel phase of Flash's origin story. There's a predictable military plot to capture meta-folks (like Plastique) as combat assets. When unleashed from his lock-up lair, Wells' telepathic gorilla does a hairy hulk routine underground.

Although the show benefits from decades of DC comics lore to draw upon (one episode features a version of Atom), the appeal is lightweight/lighthearted, and too much screen time's devoted to crime drama conventions or relationship dross instead of sci-fi/fantasy, so quicker heroics are often manic or slo-mo interruptions between police station and coffee shop. It's too fond of De Palma arc-shots for camera moves, although seeing all of the run-around options that Flash's powers offer this might be appropriate, especially considering the circuitous timeline plots of this debut season. In the finale, Flash finds out if he's *Fast Enough* to open a wormhole portal

in Wells' particle accelerator while preventing an apocalyptic singularity. There are cross-over episodes and team-ups expanding the DC-TV universe and highlighting the brighter tones of *The Flash* (whose heroics tend to reject moral compromise) in a contrast to the sober noir of *Arrow*.

With a main cast picked for cheekbones and jawlines, corrupted city drama **ARROW SEASON THREE** (DVD/Blu-ray, 28 September) is about ex-playboy/failed mogul Oliver Queen, alias Green Arrow, a hooded vigilante whose strategy is

to keep friends at arm's length and enemies where he can see them. The comic book show explores the virtues and vices of an elite underworld where secrets are deadlier than bullets. Nocturnal archers – in green (Arrow), red (Arsenal) and black (Merlyn the Magician) – have the run of streets and rooftops, awash with outlaw testosterone.

Sara's back in town but is promptly killed and the murder spurs vengeful sister Laurel to train as replacement Black Canary. Brandon Routh (of *Superman Returns*) plays Ray Palmer, Oliver's corporate rival planning to re-brand Starling as Star City and combat crime in his OMAC-derivative A.T.O.M. tech-suit, an Iron Man-lite (even less impressive than Marvel's War Machine) that pre-empts *Ant-Man*. Nyssa al Ghul (Katrina Law, *Spartacus*) is a ninja babe from the League of Assassins – none of *Dark Knight*'s namby-pamby vagueness about 'Shadows' for this woman – trying to escape from the lethal obligations to her powerful father's quasi-Arab society/cult of death.

Peter Stormare is good fun as evil mind-bender Count Vertigo. Brother Eye is a hackivist launching viral attacks. An Arrow-obsessed serial killer, Carrie Cutter – alias Cupid – appears in *Draw Back Your Bow*, becoming our hero's stalker. When Captain Boomerang comes around, the Flash shows up, just in time to help Team A defeat the baddie. Vinnie Jones plays a mobster named Brick. Ollie fights duels against demon's head Ra's al Ghul, and eventually Ollie is renamed Ah Sah-him as heir to the League leadership.

The same old problem dogs *Arrow* as its conspiratorial storyline remains stuck in the past with a cycle of flashbacks to Ollie's lost years in Hong Kong. Its flashbacks are a rare example of how more telling and less showing would be preferable because, as a built-in prequel to practically everything that happens in the city, this past is not a prologue, it's only needless mystery padding, a DC-TV universe storytelling solution without a problem. Thankfully, however, the overblown/overplayed origin tale finally catches up with the beginning of *Arrow*'s present-day narrative.

Elsewhere in this burgeoning DC multiverse, *Supergirl* starts on British TV 29th October, and yet another superheroes show, *Legends of Tomorrow*, begins next year.

Re-watching the likes of *Aliens* and *Doom* without any closer study except for blatant copycat aims is just the type of slavish fan-boy activity that probably led to **INFINI** (DVD, 21 September). Maker of blandly contrived fantasy *Gabriel* (2007), Australian director Shane Abbess' latest stub-genre effort is a hopelessly derivative spaced-out mystery. The teleportation deployment of troops saves a fortune on starship effects and still lands a rescue squad on the mining colony where they save the lone survivor of a disastrous biohazard – spreading insanity from 'primordial ooze' with plenty of inane and pointless violence that seems like a marker of creative frustration. What looks cool always takes precedence over what might make sense in terms of plot development or characters' behaviour, so the barmy clichés of skiffy contagion catastrophe are here, refurbished with fun-free solemnity but still third-rate as SF or horror. Overacting like crazy when they are supposed to go mad, the undistinguished cast of macho stereotypes are easily eclipsed by Grace Huang, giving the only credible performance in her fair attempt at portraying a quietly sympathetic heroine.

Hong Kong fantasy fu comedy-actioner **ICEMAN** (Blu-ray/DVD, 21 September) sees the great Donnie Yen playing a Ming dynasty warrior and royal bodyguard, defrosted to fight 400-year-old traitors, and some present-day crooks, while the baddies search for "the Golden Wheel of Time" and Shiva's magic penis.

Heavy on quirky comic book style CGI, high on dry wit and lowbrow farce, this flits back and forth between ancient battles of honour and some modern corruption, with gangster violence and typically variable sitcom routines along the way. Meeting nice party girl May (Shengyi 'Eva' Huang, of *Emperor and the White Snake*), heroic Ying (Yen) adopts her as plucky sidekick and guide to future-tech, which he adapts to in nonplussed fashion while he is righting wrongs all over the city, sometimes with cartoon tortures, even while posing as a policeman. May fulfils her heroine role doing 90 on a scooter to outrun a Lamborghini during the chase through bridge traffic.

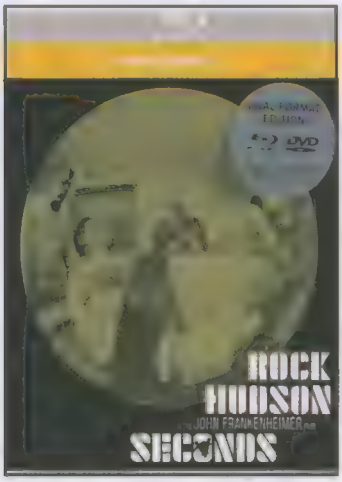
The Chinese styled *Highlander* showdown makes for an entertaining climax in the current vogue for superhero cinema. *Iceman 2* is in post-production.

In **MAD MAX: FURY ROAD** (Blu-ray/DVD, 5 October) our favourite raggedy man is still out there, but no longer a scourge of the wastelands because nowadays he's got ample competition.

While Batman's foe 'Bane' becomes the new Max, George Miller's replacement star is Furiosa – five-foot-nine of warrior idol, carved from solid woman – who offers the wandering hero a fuel-injected salvation. As desert despot Joe presides over the worst water-distribution system known to man or beast, it's Furiosa who sets out as his trade envoy but, intent on saving an escaped harem, she opts for a detour to no-man's-land, heading for the safety zone of a green/feminist sanctuary.

The survivors of a thoroughly damaged gene-pool battle on through thick dust storms and thin odds. While the first hour of this movie would be quite enough action for most post-holocaust adventures, director Miller's triumphant return to the classic series that made his name maintains suspense with the twilight atmosphere of a blue period before the battle-truck crew turns around for an even harder drive back home.

More than once, on the hard path to hope and redemption, Max wakes in fright. He is not in his right mind, of course. While teamed up with Furiosa, Max struggles – albeit manfully – to avoid reclassification as her generic male sidekick, much



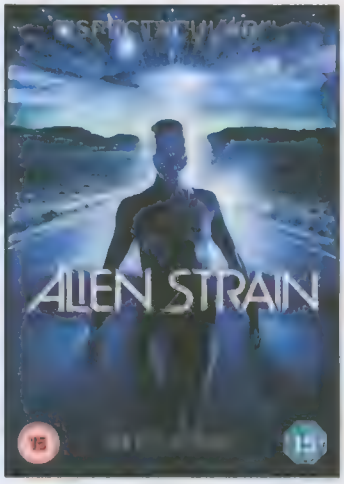
like the macho dudes who share screen-time with Milla Jovovich's heroine Alice in the *Resident Evil* franchise.

A tragic fairy tale of runaway brides fits seamlessly in chaotic drama about cold wrath versus indomitable spirits. Although these exotic and mysterious characters are all fantasy/western archetypes with witty names, and dialogue is largely a throwaway script of bombastic threats and savoury quips, the crazy pursuit and anarchic fighting and magnificent stunt work boasts a level of sustained thrills that outdoes most of the Marvel superhero movies. A sequel, *Mad Max: The Wasteland*, reuniting Furiosa and Max, is planned. Witness!

Tired of steampunk? Ready for BMXpunk? **TURBO KID** (DVD/Blu-ray, 5 October) offers a post-apocalypse alt. 1997 world where cyborg-cowboys ride push-bikes. This acid-rainy daze comic book western about a scavenger boy-hero's adventures boasts frequently campy splatter in whimsical wastelands of preY2K nostalgia. A supposedly desiccated future of sleeping dust and ashes, it's a wrecked fairy tale realm somewhere between retread and pastiche, where timeless yet unspoken prophecy might provide a welcome twist to dodgy sci-fi shenanigans.

When his ditsy robot companion/girlfriend Apple ("This is my gnome stick. Feel the wrath of Mr Gnome!") is kidnapped by villains our teenage rebel confronts Michael Ironside, who plays puffy-faced (but despicable) tyrant Zeus: "I want blades and fire!" There are cycle chases, gladiatorial blunder-dome fights, and an extremely gory playground showdown over a hidden source of water. This is terrifically good as cheesy fun that really knows its junk genre comedy-action subject and coming-of-age survival themes inside out.

Shot in Canada, it depicts a perforated world that tears uneasily along familiar seams. A polemic in grunge, pulp poetry in rusty shades, *Turbo Kid* is another clever addition to superhero cinema that revels in having-its-cake-and-eating-it moments.



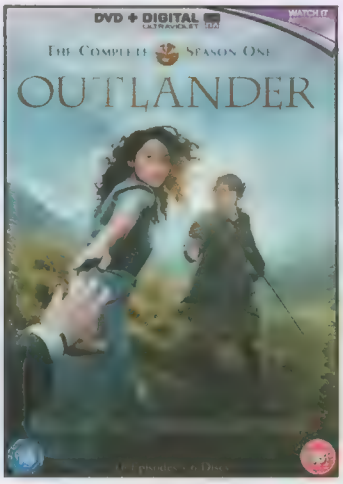
Based on a graphic novel, Canadian TV sci-fi mystery **DARK MATTER SEASON ONE** (DVD, 12 October) concerns a starship named *Raza*, where six people wake up from cryo-sleep without memories. Jodelle Ferland (*Tideland*, *The Tall Man*) plays a teen techie dubbed Five, and blondroid (Zoie Palmer, *Lost Girl*) establishes a crew of seven distinctive and fairly likeable characters. Initially, the plot focuses upon secrets locked in the ship's cargo hold, and helping miners on a nearby colony planet to resist corporate bullying. Soon enough, the *Raza* gang are revealed as galactic mercenaries-without-portfolio, now fighting Ferrous Corp stormtroopers like high frontier heroes in shoot 'em ups with ray-guns versus bullets alongside anachronistic samurai sword fights.

Dark Matter is thirteen episodes of sci-fi that's too low-budget for building up much genuine futurism. Shamelessly derivative of *Blake's 7*, by way of buccaneering *Firefly* and *Serenity*, and influenced in particular by *Starhunter*, this is a space western that rattles along agreeably despite escalating tensions within a starship crew that are not really a proper team. At a space station for trade, One (the first 'defrosted') meets his doppelganger, while their unofficial yet optimal leader Two (Melissa O'Neil) courts a violent meeting with casino gangsters. When the crew discover some facts about their personal histories it's no big surprise that their past identities are not good news, and so a fresh start (with redemptive aims) looks promising, if they can learn to trust each other.

Hired for a combat salvage job, the crew find a ship haunted by zombies on the loose in a generic borrowing from *Event Horizon*. Five's voluntary mind-probe grants access to the group's memories in a virtuality, opening flashback-floodgates for sadly dull back-story revelations (mediocre SF) and further character origins in subsequent episodes. When the crew finally manage to open *Raza*'s sealed hold, they find a dying woman and a sex drone stored inside. New android Wendy (Ruby Rose, 'Abigail' in the next and possibly final *Resident Evil* movie) turns out to be a timebomb-program spy-bot in characteristic opposition, much like a Lore to blondroid's Data.

Despite a notable lack of more imaginative tech that SF fans might expect from a galactic-scale civilisation, there are 3D-printed clones used as 'teleport' subs. (Not a practice recommended for anxious astronauts prone to paranoia or ID-related psych problems.) The *Raza* crew are hired for a heist and forced to work with another gang but of course their plan fails at first, and then a no-honour-among-thieves plot twist leaves Two playing *Die Hard* in space.

Overall, this is good entertainment of its unambitious type, so I'm glad to hear that it's been renewed for a second season.



Twin Peaks, Smallville, Sunnydale (in *Buffy*), Point Pleasant and Storybrooke (*Once Upon a Time*) are fine examples of cursed communities in genre TV. Stephen King's TV variations include Salem (*'Salem's Lot*), Chester's Mill (*Under the Dome*) and picturesque Haven: a coastal town, stricken with Troubles, where people have secret powers that result in bizarre crimes and/or weird miracles.

"We should never have opened that door." Unless you've followed the previous seasons, **HAVEN SEASON FIVE** (DVD, 12 October) is one of those long-narrative serials that's probably impossible to simply jump into, especially when many episodic plots are centred on residents and their actions rather than fantastic happenings (as in *The X-Files*). The show is primarily about character profiles and their relationships so unless you know what he or she did before nothing they do or say now is likely to make much sense.

Basically, *Haven* is a medley of ghost stories and gothic witchcraft with legends about identity and secret histories, a contemporary American folklore of supernatural perceptions and anxiety-obscured memories.

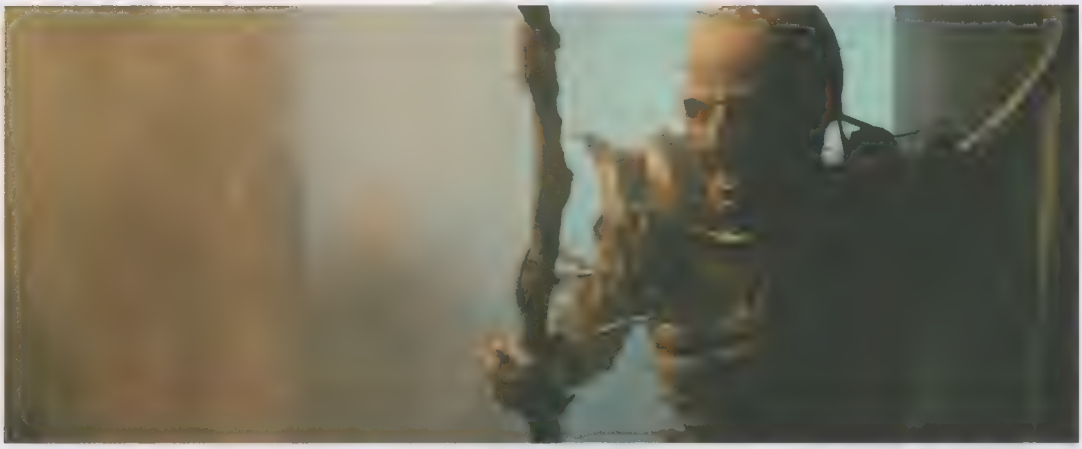
Nathan is still in love with Audrey, but Audrey is now Mara, who'd rather just stab him in the crotch. Duke causes people to suffer with their faces sewn up. Dwight remains a magnet for bullets. Mara's quest for 'aether' draws focus to her not-Audrey persona, and lonesome Duke falls for her pretender's guile. Two-parter *Switcheroo* is a body-swap comedy of hugely inconvenient timing that reveals personal secrets, and is great fun for the cast while playing each other's roles.

When Audrey and Mara ("I'm the candy, she's the wrapper") eventually split in two, both played by Emily Rose, only one of them keeps her immunity to Troubles. In *Exposure*, photography causes 'nuclear shadows' with banished spirits haunting their nearest and dearest. Subsequent episodes (*Morbidity*, *Mortality*, etc) concentrate on a mysterious disease and the new stranger in town claims to be a CDC doctor. Falling under suspicion of harbouring a contagion, Haven is threatened by scientific scrutiny and quarantine.

As mid-season closer *Chosen* begins, Duke, the living vault of Troubles, starts leaking potent waves of disaster for Haven. Audrey is ready to become the very model of a modern super-heroine, prepared to sacrifice herself for the greater good, whether she has any powers or not.

Since the full extent of season five has not been broadcast yet, this DVD set is only volume one. Season Five's second batch of thirteen episodes (DVD volume two) start airing this October. Thank you for visiting Haven. Come back soon!

Haven has recently been cancelled by Syfy, so season five is the last.



Metal Hurlant Chronicles Season Two is released in the UK as **METAL HURLANT RESURGENCE** (Blu-ray/DVD, 19 October), and it offers another batch of episodes from the comic book derivative anthology TV show. As in season one, there's plenty of surface gloss but very little depth or genre intrigue.

Michael Biehn and James Marsters co-star in a weird western, *Whiskey in the Jar*, about a doctor with magical healing hands and a macabre legacy. *The Endomorphe* sees war rediscovered after a slaves' revolt. Watch out for the white rabbit!

Loyal Khondor concerns a defeated space fleet fleeing a conquered planet and an alien warrior searching for a cure to save a dying princess. Ever-busy Welsh export John Rhys-Davies (who was almost unrecognisable without his trademark beard as a corrupt PM in British thriller *31 North 62 East*) appears briefly, playing an alchemist keeping the secret of immortality. On the strength of this unimpressive space opera it would appear that not much of Jodorowsky's original comic book story survived in the TV adaptation by Guillaume Lubrano.

Second Chance revisits the asteroid casino (seen in the previous episode) from where a gambler hero flees in debt, escaping via stargate and cosmic roulette wheel to a time-warp destiny. Faux medievalism and sibling rivalry in *Second Son* only furnish anachronistic style over genre serial substance in the feuding brothers' endless duels. French star Dominique Pinon stars in *Back to Reality*, a virtuality escapade that flips into brainwashing cyber-noir with an unexpected PKD twist.

Thor: The Dark World's director Alan Taylor hammers the Cyberdyne reset button for **TERMINATOR GENISYS** (DVD/Blu-ray, 2 November), in which the recasting choices are centred by Schwarzenegger's returning, and welcome, presence as cybulky Guardian to *GoT* star Emilia Clarke's fresh-faced Sarah Connor.

Like a greatest hits album of memorable clips from the first two *Terminator* flicks, plus time-shifts imported from that nifty *Sarah Connor Chronicles* TV show, this is a livewire reboot with quantum nexus tweaks and appealingly rebellious twists. And so it would probably be "a very immature response" not to enjoy most of the clever witty changes of this revised timeline. But this is basically a refresher course in apocalypse-avoidance launched from the money-spinning platform where radical deviations from canon/lore would seem obsolete. Because the recycling action of too much of today's genre cinema has become merely a slick enterprise with mega-studio support, we can soon expect to see follow-up spin-offs prefaced by the corporate logo for Fan-Fiction Inc. The filmmakers appear so keen to produce a tribute movie that they neglected to include anything new/very interesting of comparable worth to what we have already seen in this almost exhausted franchise. Taylor and his crew might have set out to do something like a *Man of Steel* but they merely produced another *Superman Returns*. For all its varied narrative/aesthetic flaws, *Terminator Salvation* was a better movie than this.

When the focus of a picture, and its core values as entertainment, is only about timely repeats of some quotable lines and the reappearance of familiar imagery, then cinema lapses into a recursive mirror-world of narcissistic irrelevance, drunk on 'cult-classic' homebrew or rewired to eke out the last ergs/amps from dying batteries, not to mention incompatible metaphors. There is no movie but that which we remake for ourselves.

Serbian animated feature **TECHNOTISE: EDIT & I** (DVD, 9 November) breathes cyber-life into Belgrade 2074 with virtuality, hover traffic, pet robots, and sex options including plastic or meat. Anxious student Edit gets an illicit chip-implant, ostensibly to improve her memory, but after rarely-speaking autistic Abel warns her of danger in the immediate future the biotech turns weird. Schism-fractal development prompts a schizo-frantic response and soon Edit sees a ghosted persona that's like advantageous possession, so Edit knows matrix fu and gains powers of spider-woman agility.

Autumnal images recur in this urban mystery-thriller, with sci-fi action scenes and a sense of humour that's often as sharp as a glass knife, in an engaging plot which intriguingly blends SF themes from *Akira* and *Tron*. When she unwittingly becomes a fugitive from police and corporate goons, Gibsonite heroine Edit and her phantasmic male 'sidekick' Edi delve into a world of complexity that borrows freely from reading as much early Jeff Noon and Rudy Rucker as Bruce Sterling and Greg Egan. Overall, it's a post-cyberpunk adventure that's full of witty asides (Slobodan Milosevic appears in a nightmarish flashback) and quirky twists. As a solid example of genre storytelling packed with keenly fascinating details, this is one of the finest animation movies that I have seen in the last few years. Until someone brings quantum 'diddly diddly' magic of Richard Calder's tragicomedy fairy tale *Dead Girls* to the screen, this will do nicely.

SHARKNADO 3: OH HELL NO! (DVD, 23 November) flies headlong into a genre spoof category in the National Lampoon style. As fishy-terror storms ravage US low-pressure zones, and bring death and destruction to fakery of Universal studios theme park rides, we might gawp in amused surprise at this skiffy-horror TV disaster movie written by Thunder Levin (what a great name!) and directed by Anthony C. Ferrante, and wonder if the trilogy is some kind of ridiculously trite metaphor for illegal aliens, WMD anxieties or the American Islamophobiapocalypse. No? Really!? You're sure?

Earnest superhero Fin Shepard (Ian Ziering) leads the cast of regulars through deadpan comedy-action routines, peppered with celebrity cameos, that culminate in a desperate space shuttle flight (can you guess what our heroes' re-entry 'vehicle' is?) to save the world, or at least avert an inane tragedy for their beleaguered WASP family. According to IMDb these sharxploitation flicks are growing in popularity, just as they disrupt any familiar critical standards to make the mockbuster model worthwhile and redefine the trashy merits of so-bad-it's-good entertainment beyond its niche market. Honestly… "I don't know whether to be impressed or concerned." *Sharknado 4* is due in 2016.

SPEC OPS: RETRO

Previously reviewed for *Black Static* #4, **EYES WITHOUT A FACE** (aka *Les yeux sans visage*, Dual Format, 24 August) was made in 1960 by Georges Franju, and it's one of the very select European horrors of its period which remains genuinely disturbing and haunting in equal measures today. This is an uncanny pulp fantasy that harks back to silent classics. Dr Genessier is obsessed with restoring the disfigured face of daughter Christiane (Edith Scob), locked away in the mad scientist's lab where she habitually wears a white mask.

After acquiring, by dastardly means, suitably attractive flesh-donors, the skin-graft operations fail, driving the anguished Christiane back into hiding. Eventually she becomes weary, too afraid of her father's ruthlessness, and grows ashamed of watching others cruelly sacrificed for her transplant makeovers. Rejecting repeat surgery, she turns against the unsuccessful project. And then Christiane finally escapes into the world…

Unforgettably unsettling images by accomplished cinematographer and effects pioneer Eugen Schufftan are combined with the outstanding music of composer Maurice Jarre, and Franju's poetic direction produces a stunning, almost unique (albeit influenced by Cocteau's surrealism!) visual epic that's ultimately about the subjective nature of beauty and madness, discovering identity, and medical ethics. The imagery of *EWAF* influenced such diverse pictures as Carpenter's *Halloween* and Woo's *Face/Off*, but most

[illegible]

obviously its darkly mysterious themes recur in Almodovar's body horror *The Skin I Live In*.

"The question of death selection may be the most important decision in your life." Starring Rock Hudson, **SECONDS** (Dual Format, 26 October) was directed by John Frankenheimer and made in 1966, with its crisp b&w cinematography restored and remastered to stunning effect for this hi-def release.

Staid banker Hamilton (John Randolph) fakes his death and becomes youthful Wilson

(Hudson), "absolved of all responsibility" except for self-interest. Following his traumatic experience of waking up with a new name and a freshly handsome face, Wilson's newfound freedom is not without random complications, as a human spirit takes up new biological residence and uncertainties accumulate with a mesmerising appeal. "There never was a struggle in the soul of a good man that wasn't hard."

Unlike Frankenheimer's earlier, and initially ill-fated, postmodern classic *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962, remade 2004), *Seconds* is more of a cult-worthy rarity (notably affecting Beach Boy Brian Wilson's cinema attendance for decades!). It is a broodingly paranoiac drama often focused on an identity crisis that is expressionistic, and it's an intriguingly Kafkaesque flipside to Jack Gold's *Who?* (1973), told as if from behind the mask. With leisurely paced sci-fi horror and mystery thrills, its weird kind of post-baptism renewal can be viewed as intellectual and social criticism of religious cults (all beliefs are viewed interchangeably as the same creed here), but it also works on a more personal level for the overcautious, emotionally repressed Wilson as a very frightening tale of rediscovery and surviving a subsequent loss of self. After Wilson is manhandled into overcoming his reluctance for hedonistic revels, he soon gets drunk enough to play golf in orbit, and so nearly exposes the second-chance organisation's encroachingly sinister re-birthing scheme. "I think we can go to the next stage now."

"Seconds was directed by John Frankenheimer and made in 1966, with its crisp b&w cinematography restored and remastered to stunning effect for this hi-def release"

At its core is a rather timeless cyclical plot of immortality via resurrection, with one tawdry romantic aspect (something similar was turned into a wry fantasy comedy by Warren Beatty's remake of *Heaven Can Wait*, 1978) but with plenty of ideas more recently used for SF action in Tarsem Singh's *Self/Less* (DVD/Blu-ray, 9 November). Amusingly, the plastic surgeon in *Seconds* is played by Richard Anderson, who went on to co-star in cybernetic-makeover TV series *The Six Million Dollar Man*.

SKUNKY CHUNKS: ROUND-UP

Peter Winther's skiffy *Painkillers*, re-titled **TOUR OF DUTY** (DVD, 28 September), is about the amnesiac survivors of a secret US army mission into Afghan mountains. There is a futile attempt to restore the hoary cliché about something alien found in a cave. Rent-a-plank Tahmoh Penikett stars, dumbfounded by resulting medical tests and an inevitable Majesticonspiracy, while Erica Durance (Lois Lane in *Smallville*) is wasted here, playing his bogus wife.

Brian Trenchard-Smith's cult sci-fi/horror clunker *Turkey Shoot* (aka *Escape 2000*, 1982) is re-imagined for today's killer-sport/*Hunger Games* fans as *Turkey Shoot*, re-titled **ELIMINATION GAME** (DVD/Blu-ray, 12 October). Director Jon Hewitt's hi-tech actioner about human targets centres on ex-Navy SEAL Rick Tyler (Dominic Purcell). A joke-free black comedy ("It's live, with death") of manhunts and murder as TV entertainment, this is ploddingly dull and far too low-budget for much convincing spectacle or many realistic stunts.

ALIEN STRAIN (DVD, 19 October) is another dreary UFOlogy drama of abduction/mutation, with ambiguity folded into a scenario fractured by psych stress over guilt or loss. Any average episode of *The X-Files* is about ten times better than this.

Tomm Moore's animated feature **SONG OF THE SEA** (Blu-ray/DVD, 2 November) explores Irish myths of selkies with terrible folk-musical interludes to cringe at. *SotS* is far too miyazaKIDisney for my taste. The best bit – well, the only good bit really – is the Halloween bus driver.

Doctor Who spin-off **DOWNTIME** (DVD, 16 November) is a glorified fan-fix video production with am-dram level acting, somewhat glamorised by the presence of *Who* supporting characters Sarah-Jane and the Brigadier. There's no sign of the Tardis or his lordship of course. Although it's skimpy on creepy details and comically clichéd with electric-yetis on a supposed 'rampage', this does manage occasionally to strike the right tone of classic 1970s *Who*. Sadly, it was made in 1995. It doesn't help that an allegedly evil mastermind looks like an off-duty Santa. Probably best to hide behind a sofa (for 68 minutes) until it's all over.

LATE ARRIVALS

OUTLANDER SEASON ONE (DVD/Blu-ray, 26 October). Time travel saga set in 1946 and 1743.

THE MAN FROM THE FUTURE (DVD, 9 November). Brazilian time-travelling romantic comedy.

MINIONS (DVD/Blu-ray, 16 November). The Minions serve Scarlet Overkill in this *Despicable Me* prequel.

Tony reviews a lot more DVDs and Blu-rays in our sister magazine *Black Static*, sometimes with easy-to-enter competitions to win new releases. (Don't forget to visit our website regularly, competitions sometimes appear there too.)

In issue 49, out now, he covers *The Canal*, *John Wick*, *The Man Who Could Cheat Death*, *Gotham*, *Bones*, *Insidious Chapter 3*, *Wer*, *The Naked Prey*, *Pay the Ghost*, *The Skull*, *Final Girl*, *Blood Moon*, *The Houses of Halloween*, *The Passage*, *A Christmas Horror Story*, *Deadly Virtues*, *Vampires*, *Knock Knock*, *Let Us Prey*, *Howl*, *The Messenger* and others.

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